

University of Akron

2024 Voter Friendly Campus Action Plan



University of Akron- Campus Action Plan

Executive Summary

Who: The 2024 Campus Action Plan from the University of Akron was developed by a small focus group that included students, staff, and community members. Staff and faculty were broadly invited to participate in developing the Action Plan, and when none voluntarily came forward, personal invitations were sent to on campus partners to invite them into the focus group process.

Purpose: The purpose of this 2024 Campus Action Plan is to continue to grow democratic and civic engagement at the University of Akron. In the first year of work, focus was placed on trying new things, meeting new people, implementing new initiatives all while trying to grasp a sense of campus climate. This Action Plan includes tweaks to successes and complete overhaul of misses while being mindful of inclusivity and accessibility.

Where: This plan will be implemented at the main campus of the University of Akron and focusing on undergraduate students.

Goals: The goals of this plan focus primarily on election education and building ease access to voting. Still being relatively new to this process, the University is still waiting for NSLVE information to better determine a baseline for where UA students are in registration and voting habits. Because so many UA students are from the State of Ohio and Summit County specifically, to avoid assuming all students are registered, the University must assume that no one is registered. However, students seem aware of the registration process but do have a disconnect to actual voting and elections in the State of Ohio.

Duration: This plan will be implementing many of our initiatives for the entire calendar year to hopefully have continuity into and through the November General Election.

How: The plan will be informed and implemented by a coalition of students and partnerships with staff and faculty.

Leadership

In preparation for this Action Plan, a small focus group of collaborators convened to brainstorm possible goals, strategies, and evaluation methods for the upcoming semester. Several of these initiatives were based on observation and participation in the Ohio 2023 Special Election in August and the 2023 General Election in November.

Leadership includes two University of Akron staff and seven student leaders, and one representative from the Summit County Board of Elections and one representative from Akron Area League of Women Voters:

University of Akron Contract Professional Staff:

- Corie Steinke (convener, head report author)- Assistant Director, Civic Engagement and Leadership Programs, Department of Student Life
- Paije Lewis- Director of Student Athlete Development, Department of Athletics

Zips Vote initiatives are specifically outlined in the job description of the Assistant Director, Civic Engagement and Leadership Programs and will be in the Department of Student Life. If the Assistant

Director position is vacant, the programming initiatives would largely be adopted by the Director of Student Life, including the supervision of any student staff.

University of Akron Undergraduate Students:

- Khatonia Ford- President, National Pan-Hellenic Council; Social Action Chair, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.
- Max Pastoria- Treasurer and Interim President, Honors Civics Club
- Aaron Uhl- 2023 President, College Democrats at the University of Akron*
- Dylan Carter- 2024 President, College Democrats at the University of Akron*
- Grace Edwards- President, IGNITE
- Alia Baig- President, Undergraduate Student Government
- Cameron Feezel- Vice President, Undergraduate Student Government

Student involvement is on a naturally cyclical basis as students graduate, transfer, or otherwise leave leadership positions. Student leaders in roles listed above will always be given right of first refusal to participate. Future steps are to include Zips Vote participation in student organization Constitutions for appropriate student organizations.

Akron Community Partners:

- Dawn Zelich- Precinct Election Official Coordinator, Summit County Board of Elections
- Kathie Brown- Representative from Akron Area League of Women Voters

*Student representatives from the College Republicans were contacted to request participation but that request was not returned in time to contribute to the 2023-2024 action plan. College Republicans will be invited in engagement opportunities in spring 2024.

Commitment- Description of commitment to improving democratic engagement

Included in the mission of the University of Akron is a commitment to “develop enlightened members of society...and provides service to the community.” This is demonstrated due to the various entities on campus that exist on campus with the purpose to engage in service, volunteerism, civic engagement, community engagement, and democratic engagement:

- Office of Civic Engagement and Leadership Programs (CELP)- Housed within the Department of Student Life, CELP coordinates intentional co-curricular civic engagement programming and democratic engagement opportunities for UA students through the ongoing Zips Vote initiative.
- ExL Center for Experiential Learning- The ExL Center focuses intentionally on experiential community engagement, and “strive(s) to enable students to emerge as civically engaged, skilled and adaptable leaders, ready to take on real-world challenges.” While the ExL Center does not provide straightforward paths to voter and democratic engagement, rather the ExL Center connects students to partners to complete meaningful academic connections to hands on coursework related to issues in the surrounding community.
- Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics- The Bliss Institute is a “bipartisan research, teaching and experiential learning institute dedicated to increasing understanding of the political process with special emphasis on political parties, grassroots activity, civility and ethics, and hands-on learning through internships and events.” The Bliss Institute hosts events, forums, discussions,

and programming and conducts research specifically targeting political engagement, open to all of campus.

- Department of Political Science- The Department of Political Science provides a robust and diverse undergraduate course schedule that includes curriculum on the history of government and politics in America, various government entities, and the history and process of campaigns and elections.

Currently, there is still not a centralized campus department or office that all initiatives coordinate through.

There are also multiple student organizations on campus identified as political/government special interest or civic engagement special interest. Zips Vote began focus groups conversations with these organizations as civic engagement is a mission per their Constitution. All descriptions of the clubs are taken from the University of Akron's student organization management system, Presence (Ro Connect):

- College Democrats at the University of Akron- The College Democrats at The University of Akron (CDUA) are committed to encouraging community and party activism by introducing young voters to the political process, being a visible presence on campus, helping our Democratic candidates win elections, promoting issues that are important to us, and supporting our members in networking and career-building. They offer education on internships, leadership training, and career-building to their members to aid in the growth of future Party, political, and civic leaders.
- College Republicans- College Republicans is a club on campus that has a myriad of opportunities for those that are interested in politics and want to express their views in a comfortable place, that not only encourages them to be more politically active, but also opens the door to many work, volunteer and networking opportunities.
- IGNITE- IGNITE at the University of Akron is an affiliate of IGNITE National, a group focused on empowering women to own their political power and use their voices and unique experiences to better their communities. The club is a nonpartisan organization focused on supporting women in politics and government through open discourse, service, and leadership. The purpose of IGNITE is to increase the political ambition and civic engagement of its members. Meetings will include things like service projects, public speaking training, organized action, leadership training, mentorship opportunities, open discussion, career building, and more.
- Ohio Students Association- Formed in 2012, the Ohio Student Association (OSA) is a state-wide student organization that provides a space for both undergraduate and graduate students to learn skills necessary for the planning and participation in political organizing and political actions. OSA aims to create a platform for students to be informed about local systems within the University and their communities that have a direct impact on them and those around them, while at the same time providing the resources necessary for students to build power and become leaders for real, material change within their communities.
- Turning Point, USA- The organization's mission is to identify, educate, train, and organize students to promote the principles of freedom, free markets, and limited government. Since the founding, Turning Point USA has embarked on a mission to build the most organized, active, and powerful conservative grassroots activist network on college campuses across the country.

- Young Americans for Freedom- Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) is an ideologically conservative youth activism organization that takes pride in ensuring that students' free speech rights are not silenced on college campuses. Young Americans for Freedom also works to advance the conservative movement on campus and is committed to increasing the number of young Americans who understand and are inspired by the principles of individual freedom, free enterprise, limited government, and traditional values.
- Honors Civics Club- The Honors Civics Club serves to educate students at The University of Akron on open expression and communication tactics and to encourage them to utilize their First Amendment rights outlined in the Bill of Rights of the U.S. Constitution, namely that of freedom of speech.

Because of these student organizations, the University of Akron provides a space for all students along the political spectrum to find a place to learn, be energized by democracy, and get engaged with each other.

Moving forward, Zips Vote will be engaging with affinity organizations to increase equitable presence for diverse student voices. Though civic engagement is not directly in the mission of most student organizations, inviting the presence of select student organizations will provide further insight and ensure inclusion of all students. Groups that would be specifically invited include UA Latinos, Muslim Student Association, Hillel, Asian Students in Akron, Black Excellence Commission, Black Students United, and LGBTUA.

Landscape

Campus Community Student Data: The University of Akron (UA) is a vital, urban, public research university situated in the heart of downtown Akron, Ohio. According to the [Common Data Set](#) information, UA enrolls 11,452 full-time undergraduate students and 2,066 graduate and law students. UA offers over 200 undergraduate majors and nationally top tier graduate and professional degrees. Though UA has highly regarded polymer science and pre-law programs, the largest college is the Buchtel College of Arts and Sciences housing humanities, education, fine arts, natural sciences, and social sciences programs (almost 3,500 students).

The University of Akron is a predominantly white (70%) institution and slightly more than half female-identified student population (51%). 25% of students are another race other than white/non-Hispanic or Latino. Within the campus population, UA's student body primarily comes from Summit County and surrounding counties of Portage, Wayne, Medina, Stark, and Cuyahoga counties. According to the University of Akron [Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data System](#) publicly accessible through the University webpage, just under 2,500 housing units are available for students. Therefore, almost 80% of the total student population commutes to campus, and slightly more than 50% of first year students live on campus. UA also sees roughly 400 transfer students every year.

According to the [Institutional Search](#) data, a strong majority of the student body hails from the state of Ohio (91%). 20% of the student population identifies as first-generation students, where no parent has graduated from college or university.

City Location and Off-Campus Climate: The University of Akron is in downtown Akron and provides space easily accessible to the public. Several buildings are accessible for the community to use and participate

in activities, including off campus partners who wish to host their own voter registration and education initiatives. Off campus partners are not permitted to host programs without paying event fees, so many off campus partners canvass outside of academic and campus life buildings.

Based on racial demographics, it is the opinion of the report authors that the on-campus climate is not reflective of the off-campus climate. Just below 55% of the City of Akron are white/non-Hispanic or Latino.

Because of UA's proximity to government offices situated downtown, there is no current need to bring voting related entities physically to campus. The University is located less than 1 mile from the Summit County Board of Elections (Exchange Street Residence Hall is less than ½ a mile). The voting location for the precinct the University is in (First United Methodist Church) is located 1 mile from campus (approximately a 15 minute walk). Additionally, in fall 2023, the University of Akron changed to a third-party parking servicer, making affordability of parking out of reach to service all possible off campus voters as the University no longer offers free parking to guests.

Current Institutional Efforts for Improving Democratic Engagement: Efforts to improve Democratic Engagement are largely scattered across the University without consolidated message. There seems to be three entities that provide more focused effort on improving democratic engagement at the University.

- [Ray C Bliss Institute of Applied Politics Annual report:](#) Outlines the curricular endeavors made to support civic engagement. The Bliss Institute focuses on advocacy and advancing the field of political science through community action. The initiatives put forth by the Bliss Institute
- [Department of Student Life, Office of Civic Engagement and Leadership Programs:](#) The Office of Civic Engagement and Leadership Programs appears to be the driver behind co-curricular voter engagement opportunities. CELP provided five opportunities to register to vote or obtain absentee ballot request forms prior to the November General Election. CELP also continued the monthly Drop In Democracy Clinics where students could ask any democracy-related question they had. CELP also provided regular reminders and updates via social media and student focused newsletters about voting opportunities and processes. Lastly, CELP financially supported student participation in the 2023 Propel Ohio Collegiate Leadership Summit and regularly participates in Campus Vote Project and All In to Vote meetings to gain insight and feedback of ongoing programs from peers across Ohio colleges and universities and other MAC institutions.
- [University Libraries:](#) Wayne campus library links voter information through the LibGuides portal, though it is mostly focused on the State of Ohio.
- The University of Akron is also participating in the Carnegie Community Engagement Reclassification process which will require lengthy evaluation and reporting on many civic engagement programs.

Goals

From the small focus groups conduct over fall semester and collecting feedback from Drop In Democracy Clinics, the University of Akron Voter Friendly Campus Action Plan should seek to address two main themes:

- 1) Make democratic engagement easier in which to participate
- 2) Make democratic process more accessible in which to understand

By and large, students participating in the focus group brought many concerns to the conversation that seemed to point towards the need for UA students to get information as accurately and as efficiently as possible. Recognizing that the students who participated in the focus group were selected by virtue of their conveyed interest in civic engagement, nearly all students stated that the average UA student is disengaged or apolitical from participating in civic engagement. For example, it may be that the average UA student is registered to vote, but the average UA student does not regularly vote or actively seek information about their ballot.

Qualitatively, the goal for the University of Akron is to achieve 75% registration by the 2024 General Election. Because UA does not have up to date NSLVE data, this percentage can be adjusted based on if or when that data is released to better create a percentage goal.

For more detailed information about strategies and ideal outcomes for each goal, see the Strategy section below.

There are six primary goals outlined in this plan:

Short Term:

- 1) Build the Zips Vote brand (all due August 1st, 2024)
- 2) Integrate voter registration into programs not sponsored by the Office of Civic Engagement and Leadership Programs (all due December 1st, 2024)
- 3) Grow faculty integration (commitment due August 1st, 2024)

Long Term:

- 1) Formalize the efforts of Zips Vote into a student led coalition to serve as the hub for co-curricular programming and data collection (ongoing, soft deadline August 23rd, 2024)
- 2) Provide more nonpartisan active and passive opportunities for students to vote, learn about their ballot, and participate before, during, and after the election (ongoing, launching for August 25th, 2024)

NSLVE

NSLVE data has not been released at the time of this report, and the University of Akron is new to the NSLVE process. Data collected was created and analyzed by the leadership team.

Strategy

ST1 Goal: Build the Zips Vote brand (all due August 1st, 2024)

ST1 Strategies:

- 1) Create both print and social media logo (ACHIEVED)
- 2) Build 100 Instagram followers by May 2024 (IN PROGRESS)
- 3) Create publicity plan for 2024-2025 academic calendar (IN PROGRESS)
- 4) Launch Zips Vote resource webpage from Office of Civic Engagement and Leadership Programs (IN PROGRESS)

ST2 Goal: Integrate voter registration into programs not sponsored by the Office of Civic Engagement and Leadership Programs (all due December 1st, 2024)

ST2 Strategies:

- 1) Partner with First Year Experience and Orientation, Learning Communities and Exploratory Advising, Department of Student Life (Weeks of Welcome, involvement fairs), Department of Athletics (IN PROGRESS)
- 2) Assess success of integration through (IN PROGRESS):
 - a. Number of overall participants or engagements
 - b. Number of follow through registrations

ST3 Goal: Grow faculty integration (commitment due August 1st, 2024)

ST3 Strategies:

- 1) Offer Zips Vote presentations in non-political science classes (IN PROGRESS)
- 2) Create report/assessment portal so faculty can report civic engagement/democratic engagement efforts
- 3) Offer partnership with Department of Political Science in one program per semester, but not including Election Night Watch Party (IN PROGRESS)
- 4) Contact Bliss faculty and Political Science faculty to develop opportunities for students to be election volunteers (IN PROGRESS)

LT1 Goal: Formalize the efforts of Zips Vote into a student led coalition to serve as the hub for co-curricular programming and data collection (ongoing, soft deadline August 23rd, 2024)

LT1 Strategies:

- 1) Create positions or responsibilities in civic engagement student organization constitutions specific to voting/voter registration (Full formal participation: spring 2025)
- 2) Work with the working group to establish voter registration training (not required in the State of Ohio), voter registration best practices, and ongoing partnerships with groups
 - a. Collaborations finalized by January 2025
 - b. Content finalized by May 2025
 - c. Ready to launch for August 2025 as required for clubs and organizations

LT2 Goal: Provide more nonpartisan active and passive opportunities for students to vote, learn about their ballot, and participate before, during, and after the election.

LT2 Strategies:

- 1) Increase passive/tabling programs to twice per month including Drop In Democracy Clinics
- 2) Celebrate civic holidays offline, in person programming
 - a. National Voter Registration Day, National Voter Education Week, Vote Early Day, etc.

Reporting

The committee will report the action planning progress and results through Campus Digest (all campus faculty and staff email) and Zip Mail (all campus student email). A report will be generated summarizing progress at the end of every semester.

The committee will also add reporting information from internal surveys and any reportable NSLVE data (once available) on the Zips Vote webpage. The Zips Vote webpage should be available to launch by mid-summer 2024.

If or when NSLVE data becomes available to the University of Akron, the report will be published through the weekly campus Digest announcements to faculty and staff, published on the Zips Vote page, and given directly to civic engagement focused student organizations with the understanding that ongoing partnership between all entities is expected.

Evaluation

Qualitatively, UA has access to many surveying options through which students can give immediate and direct feedback. This would also be an effective way to conduct pre- and post- evaluations of students' understanding of the content. Student leaders can also ask two very basic, goal related questions to randomized attendees after each program. Lastly, because all students are required to check in at campus events with their student ID, there is an opportunity to discuss more in depth interviews with students who attended programs.

For example, one method of evaluation collection would be to collect feedback, questions, and responses in real time. At monthly Drop In Democracy Clinics, the Office of Civic Engagement and Leadership Programs took record of the most frequently asked questions. Attendance at the clinics averaged between roughly 20-30 individuals depending on what was taking place in the overall election cycle. The most prominent questions were:

- 1) If I already registered to vote, do I need to re-register?
- 2) Where am I supposed to vote early?
- 3) I thought Election Day was in November (since writing the previous action plan and report, Ohio held two other elections before the General Election in November 2023).
- 4) Where do I mail this to?
- 5) What do I need to bring when I go vote?

Quantitatively, event attendance and general satisfaction surveys can be conducted after programs. Growth in attendance or engagement in programs over the semester may indicate growing interest in the strategies.

It should be noted again that the University of Akron is a new participant to the NSLVE process and due to the delays in administering the NSLVE report, UA has not received direct, relevant information that would be helpful in developing data-driven context.