

University of Montana

2024 Democratic Engagement Action Plan



*Developed by Experiential Learning and Career Success in collaboration
with the University of Montana's Coalition for Civic Engagement*



SECTION I: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The University of Montana 2024 Democratic Engagement Action Plan is a blueprint for increasing civic learning and voter participation on its campus, developed by Experiential Learning and Career Success in collaboration with UM's Coalition for Civic Engagement. The coalition was created in 2020 to expand civic learning on campus and foster lifelong habits of civic engagement among students through the united efforts of faculty, staff, students, and nonpartisan community partners.

The action plan outlines specific civic engagement initiatives UM will implement on its Missoula campus leading up to the 2024 presidential election and beyond. Its goals are to increase student registration rates, center student voices in democratic engagement work, increase student voter turnout, and expand voter education and civic learning. These goals have been informed by student voting participation records specific to our institution, including those from the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) conducted through Tufts University.

The first phase of the action plan was initiated in March 2024 and will be effective through March 2025, with long-term goals extended through the election season. This plan will be implemented by the Coalition for Civic Engagement with a focus on student-led initiatives. It is a working document that will benefit from additional voices, ongoing assessment, and further research. The coalition will revise the plan over time to include new perspectives and understandings from our students, institution, and community.

The University of Montana envisions a future where all students have access to voting, voter registration, and non-partisan voter education and are empowered to make informed decisions, participate in federal and local elections, and develop skills to build and sustain institutions and communities rooted in healthy democratic practices and civic engagement.

SECTION II: LEADERSHIP

The University of Montana's Coalition for Civic Engagement was created in 2020 to expand civic learning on campus and foster lifelong habits of civic engagement among students through the united efforts of faculty, staff, students, and nonpartisan community partners. The coalition works to cultivate a culture of year-round civic engagement on campus, building a more representative democracy in which the voices of our students are valued at every level of government. The coalition continues to grow and evolve, reflecting changes in staff and goals, as well as our institution's commitment to reflect the diversity of its campus and community in every initiative.

Succession of members is managed by Experiential Learning and Career Success, which organizes the coalition and oversees the onboarding of new members.

Current membership includes the following stakeholders:

University of Montana Leaders

- Jenah Mead (Chair) – Experiential Learning Program Manager, Office of Experiential Learning and Career Success
- Michael Rohd – Director, Co-Lab for Civic Imagination
- Emily Ferguson-Steger – Director of Student Life, The Branch Center
- Carissa Dransfield – Program Officer for Civic Engagement, Mansfield Center
- Gillian Glaes – Director, Franke Global Leadership Initiative
- Andrea Vernon – Executive Director, Office of Experiential Learning and Career Success
- Dominic Beccari – Faculty, Political Science

Community Leaders

- Bradley Seaman – Administrator, Missoula County Elections
- Josh Vanek – Executive Director, Montana Campus Compact
- Hunter Losing – Executive Director, MontPIRG
- Courtney Smith – Director of Voter Engagement, Forward Montana Foundation
- Mary LaPorte – President, League of Women Voters of Missoula

Student Leaders

- Elizabeth Kamminga – President, Associated Students of the University of Montana
- Kaitlyn Madsen - Senator, Associated Students of the University of Montana
- Taylor McPherson – Community Engagement Assistant, ELCS
- Parker Friday – UM Advocate
- TBD – Fellow, Campus Election Engagement Project (CEEP) Fellow

The coalition strives to center student voices and expand student leadership in its membership in 2024, evolving into a coalition whose initiatives are driven by students who are empowered and supported by faculty, staff, and community. To better reflect the UM's diverse community and elevate marginalized voices, we will invite leaders from The Branch Center student groups to join us this fall, including The Black Student Union, Lambda Alliance, Latine Student Union, and the Pacific Islanders Club.

SECTION III: COMMITMENT

The University of Montana is committed to understanding and activating how UM can contribute on campus and across our state to meaningful work that shores up our commitments at the individual, institutional and community levels to equitable, functional, civil democratic practices. This dedication is engrained in our institution's mission statement, which includes a call to *"shape global citizens"* and its vision statement, which envisions UM as a *"Flagship for the Future, fostering inclusive prosperity and democracy while creating new knowledge and ways of learning"* and recognizes *"the unique capacity of each individual to affect meaningful community change and we champion the vital role of higher education to nurture a healthy democratic society."*

Civic learning and democratic engagement are consistent, systematic, pervasive components of UM's institutional culture, demonstrated across programs, departments, sectors, and the entire institution through its Priorities for Action and Play Book, which calls for UM to develop a cross-campus effort to model civil dialogue and promote civic and democratic engagement. One outcome of this call was the development of the UM's Democracy Summit, a campus-wide initiative featuring engaging dialogue, student-led activities, faculty voices, and artistic performances that explored how UM can build and sustain intuitions and communities rooted in healthy democratic practices.

UM's president, Seth Bodnar, perhaps said it best in a letter to campus ahead of the 2020 election, "At the University of Montana, we recognize the singular importance of each person's voice and vote. UM is home to people from diverse backgrounds and political affiliations, and the dialogue this diversity enables rests at the heart of a UM education."

Mission Statement

The University of Montana transforms lives by providing a high-quality and accessible education and by generating world-class research and creative scholarship in an exceptional place. We integrate the liberal arts and sciences into undergraduate, graduate and professional studies to shape global citizens who are creative and agile learners committed to expanding the boundaries of knowledge and to building and sustaining diverse communities.

Vision

The University of Montana will be a Flagship for the Future, fostering inclusive prosperity and democracy while creating new knowledge and ways of learning.

We are a public research institution with doors open to all, built on a 128-year-old promise to transform lives and create pathways to meaningful success. We embrace curiosity and experimentation to meet the demands of a rapidly changing landscape while preserving the hallmarks of a holistic education. We recognize the unique capacity of each individual to affect meaningful community change and we champion the vital role of higher education to nurture a healthy democratic society.

Priorities for Action

UM's Priorities for Action serve as values that guide our decisions and actions. Each objective in this year's playbook addresses multiple priorities for action.

PFA 1: Place student success at the center of all we do

In all of our decisions and actions, we will put the success of our students first. We will focus on student retention, persistence, and success through graduation and beyond.

PFA 2: Drive excellence and innovation in teaching, learning, and research

Our curriculum, pedagogy, and research will evolve and adapt to best prepare students and communities to succeed in a dynamic, uncertain world.

PFA 3: Embody the principle of "Mission First, People Always"

People make UM successful. We will focus on people's growth and learning, and on fostering a diverse and inclusive campus.

PFA 4: Partner with Place

We benefit greatly from our natural setting and our connection to our community, state, and region. We will both use and strengthen that asset through collaborative learning opportunities, research, and service.

PFA 5: Proudly tell the UM story

We are an institution whose transformative impact on individual students, Montana, and the world needs to be known.

SECTION IV: LANDSCAPE

The University of Montana is a public R1 research institution located in Missoula, our state's second-largest city with a population of about 80,000. It rests on the aboriginal territories of the Salish and Kalispel people. 66.5% of UM students are Montana residents.

University of Montana Land Acknowledgment

Salish - "Es mistéʔes qe es lʔ, ci ʔu l ,T,atʔ ayaqn u Qlispélix^w sqlix^wúʔulex^{ws} t Nʔaycčstm K^wtis Snacʔ ʔqé'ym' ín. Qe es putʔem ʔu Sqélix^w m' im' éʔeye' ms x^wl ,olq^wštulex^w ʔu x^wl ,qʔ sqlqelix^w."

English - "The University of Montana acknowledges that we are in the aboriginal territories of Seliš (Salish) and Qlispé (Kalispel) people. We honor the path they have always shown us in caring for this place for the generations to come."

This land acknowledgment was created by the Séliš-Qlispé Cultural Committee and translated by Aspen Decker.

Student Data & Climate

UM is a participating campus of the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) through Tufts University. The Coalition for Civic Engagement uses data from the study to form a comprehensive understanding of democratic engagement on campus and evaluate the degree in which it is fulfilling its civic mission, including its role in promoting justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. Data from the study is used to identify gaps in student voting engagement unique to our institution, including which demographics are underrepresented in voter turnout, flag practices and biases that may be contributing to these gaps, set new goals, and improve voter engagement strategies.

According to the 2020 NSLVE Campus Report, UM students are more engaged than the national average for four-year institutions in terms of voting rate of registered students and overall voting rate. Despite this success, UM students lagged their peers in terms of student voter registration.

Table 1. UM Student Voter Registration and Turnout Rates, 2016-2020

	Student Voter Registration Rate		Voting Rate of Registered Students		Student Voting Rate	
	UM	National	UM	National	UM	National
2016	78.4%	76%	77.6%	69%	60.9%	52%
2020	80.4%	83%	87.4%	80%	70.3%	66%

Looking at student voting rates by demographic, UM students who identified as American Indian/ Alaskan Native, Two or More Races, or White turned out to the polls in greater numbers in 2020 compared to other demographic groups, each boasting a voting rate of 70% or higher. This was often higher than the National average. Despite this success, UM lagged their peers in engaging Asian American and Black student voters. While Asian American student turnout remains lower than other demographic groups nationally, UM saw less than average turnout with 25% of eligible Asian American student voters casting ballots compared to 51% nationally. Additionally, only 45% of eligible black student voters at UM casted ballots compared to the 63% national average. The University of Montana will prioritize engaging both groups in the coming election. A complete breakdown of student engagement by race/ethnicity can be viewed in the table below:

Table 2. UM Student Voting Rate by Demographic

Race / Ethnicity	Voting Rate in 2020	
	UM	National
Asian	25%	51%
American Indian/Alaska	70%	
Black	45%	63%
Hispanic	60%	60%
Native Hawaiian /Pacific Islander		
Two or More Races	70%	66%
White	75%	71%

Looking at student voting rates by school year, voting rates generally increased with class year for UM students in 2020, which follows the national trend. Interestingly, undergraduate students turned out to the polls in greater number than graduate students. By sex, University of Montana students who identified as female turned out to the polls in greater numbers in 2020 than students who identified as male, which follows the national trend.

UM's democratic engagement goals and initiatives will be further influenced by the 2022 NSLVE Campus Report when our institution receives it.

Big Sky Poll

In the spring of 2020, UM conducted the Big Sky Poll, a yearlong investigation with more than 940 participants to understand how and why individuals participate in public policymaking. More than 40% of participants were young people in Montana. The results offer valuable insights into why individuals participate, which will inform our coalition's strategies for increasing civic learning and democratic engagement. Relevant takeaways from the research are below:

- 85% believe their vote matters.
- 53% believe they have a big or moderate impact on their community.
- 68% said courses on community engagement were offered by someone they know in their community.
- 77% have never considered running for elected office.
- 61% would attend a public meeting or legislative hearing if it was hosted on Facebook Live or a similar format.
- More than 70% of participants said they would be more likely to vote if the State of Montana sent out a voter information guide for general and primary elections.
- Approximately 51% of participants stated they would be more likely to vote in mail-in-only elections.
- More than 70% of participants would vote if a mailed reminder was sent.

More information on the Big Sky Poll is available online at <http://www.umt.edu/bigskypoll>.

Current Institutional Efforts

The Coalition for Civic Engagement was created in 2020 ahead of the 2020 presidential election to expand civic learning on campus and foster lifelong habits of civic engagement among students through collaborative, student-centered efforts of faculty, staff, students, and nonpartisan community partners.

By following goals set out in our 2020 Democratic Engagement Action Plan, the coalition completed many new initiatives that we continued to build on in 2022 and today. In part from these efforts, student voter turnout increased by 9.4% at our institution from 66% in 2016 to 70.3% in 2020 (NSLVE Data), resulting in our being classified as a Gold Seal campus through the All in Campus Democracy Challenge. Our coalition's goals and initiatives will be further influenced by the 2022 NSLVE Campus Report when our institution receives it.

We learned that young people have the skills to cast their ballot and make their voices heard. When civic engagement is institutionalized, from our colleges to our places of work, young people create lifelong habits of civic engagement and involvement in our democracy.

Continuing efforts include, but are not limited to, the following activities:

Initiatives started in 2020

- Expanded voter registration education and opportunities into orientation programming, advising meetings, and residence life, including inviting community partners to table at appropriate freshman welcoming events to provide further opportunity to register and answer student questions.
- Held multiple registration drives where volunteers were trained on the best practices of voter registration and adhered to campus safety procedures.
- Disseminated voter education resources to distance learning students.
- Assessed the need for supplemental voter registration and voting information for students and collaborating with partners to fill any information and/or access gaps.
- Hosted fairs and volunteer events that encouraged civic engagement and civil discourse.
- Shared voter education and reminders to vote with students through email.
- Recruited a Campus Election Engagement Project (CEEP) Fellow to work with Forward Montana Foundation and MontPIRG to create and approve at least one email a year to professors.

Initiatives added in 2022

- Set up a satellite office and voter registration booths around campus.
- Maintained a more consistent schedule for coalition meetings.
- Partnered with more campus departments, such as Residence Life and the UM Food Pantry to disseminate voter education information more widely to students.
- Offered students opportunities to gain hands-on experience exploring social issues through Alternative Breaks, Service Saturdays and other volunteer events.
- Worked with the local election's office and the University Center to provide a platform to engage students at a 400-person meal-build service event where election officials spoke about the impact voting can have on social issues such as food insecurity.
- Promoted Vote Early.
- Promoted National Voter Registration Day Voter Education.
- Promoted debates to learn about issues and candidates such as a local news article focused on the race for Montana's western congressional district between candidates Ryan Zinke and Monica Tranel as well as the video of the debate which was posted on our website. V. Barriers.

SECTION V: GOALS

The University of Montana envisions a future where all students have access to voting, voter registration, and non-partisan voter education and are empowered to make informed decisions, participate in federal and local elections, and develop skills to build and sustain institutions and communities rooted in healthy democratic practices and civic engagement.

The following goals were built upon UM's 2020 and 2022 Democratic Engagement Action Plans.

Goal I. Increase Student Voter Registration Rate

Long-term Goal: Increase student registration rate to 90% by 2028 and continue to increase it every election cycle until 100% of eligible students are registered to vote.

Short-term Goals for 2024 Election:

1. Increase UM's student registration rate by 5%, growing from 80.4% in 2020 to 85.5% in 2024.
2. Remove barriers to registering to vote by hosting multiple, peer-supported registration opportunities on campus in the fall that intentionally meet students where they are at.
3. Install same-day voter registration at a satellite election office on campus.
4. Provide voter registration forms and a secure drop box in at least one, but ideally several centralized, secure, and accessible locations on campus.

Goal II: Center Student Voices in Democratic Engagement Work

Long-term Goal: By 2028, the majority of the Coalition for Civic Engagement's democratic engagement initiatives will be driven by students, empowered and supported by faculty, staff, and community.

Short-term Goals for 2024 Election:

1. The Coalition for Civic Engagement will increase student members by at least 200%, growing student membership from 3 student leaders to at least 6 when Autumn Semester commences.

2. Student leadership in the coalition will reflect the University of Montana's diverse student community and include students from at least three different demographic groups, including at least one representative from a group that is underrepresented in our institution's student voting rate.
3. Student leaders in the coalition will serve as ambassadors and peer-support, each filling student-facing roles in at least two democratic engagement events during the election cycle.

Goal III. Increase Student Voter Turnout

Long-term Goal: Increase student voter rate to 80% by 2028 and continue to increase it every election cycle until 100% of eligible students participate in elections, indicating that every UM student has the access, education, and sense of civic responsibility necessary to engage in democracy.

Short-term Goals for 2024 Election:

1. Increase UM's student voting rate by 5%, growing from 70.3% in 2020 to 75.3% in 2024.
2. Work to close demographic gaps and increase student voting rate by at least 10% in demographic groups who are underrepresented in elections as evidenced by below average voter turnout at our institute (see Table 2).
3. Remove barriers to voting by creating at least one satellite election office in a highly accessible, publicized space on campus.
4. Remove barriers to voting by increasing transportation access to polling locations.
5. Use multiple resources, including the latest NSLVE reports and our own institutions research, to strengthen our understanding of UM's voter turnout and identify opportunities for increased engagement.

Goal IV: Expand Voter Education and Civic Learning

Long-term Goal: Every student will have multiple opportunities each year to learn about important voting and election information as well as opportunities to engage in healthy, open, and welcoming experiences that allow them to explore and discuss their civic environment and the issues that are important to them.

Short-term Goals for 2024 Election:

1. Share important voter information and election dates with students through diverse methods, including social media, tabling, interactive events, emails, and messages from the provost.
2. Create, coordinate and facilitate multiple, engaging opportunities throughout the academic year for students to participate in civic learning through different modalities, both curricular and co-curricular, to provide students with a safe, inclusive space to explore issues, practice civil discourse, and connect civically to their community and beyond. Opportunities should include, but are not limited to, inviting guest speakers, facilitating panels, organizing workshops, hosting fairs, providing platforms for healthy civil discourse, and coordinating volunteer events that encourage community engagement and promote civic responsibility.

SECTION VI: STRATEGY

The Coalition for Civic Engagement plans to accomplish its short-term and long-term goals to increase civic learning and democratic engagement utilizing the strategies found in this section. It is important to note that the coalition is currently in a phase of rebuilding, following several transitions that occurred between 2022 and 2023. While new student leadership will not be complete until classes resume in the fall, faculty, staff, and community membership is nearly finalized. The coalition will resume regular meetings in June where we will enter the next phase of action, planning, in which we will refine and add to the goals and strategies described in this document.

Phase	Timeline	Description
Coalition Building	Mar - Aug 2024	Re-engage and expand membership.
Planning	Jun - Aug 2024	Coalition refines and adds to goals and strategies.
Registration Fever	Aug - Sept 2024	Amplify registration opportunities.
Education & Access	Sept - Oct 2024	Boost education and outreach efforts.
Get Out the Vote!	Oct 2024	Get students excited to vote.
Civic Learning & Engagement	Nov - May 2025	Keep students engaged civically past the election.

Goal I. Increase Student Voter Registration Rate

- Work with the Office of the Vice Provost for Student Success and UM advocates to embed voter registration education and opportunity into new student orientation and the Big Sky Experience, which occurs the week before autumn semester classes begin. Activities may include inviting community partners to host registration tables at freshman welcoming events.
- Celebrate and create voter registration opportunities for National Voter Registration Day on September 17th, 2024.
- Host multiple registration drives where volunteers are trained on best practices of voter registration.
- Create a satellite elections office in the University Center atrium where students, employees, and community members can register to vote, get a ballot, fill it out and drop it off in one place.
- Provide voter registration forms and a secure drop box in an administration office, at check-in desks in the dorms, and in the Library. Forward Montana Foundation will provide a short training for all staff working near the secure drop boxes and the resident advisors of on campus dorms concerning voter registration and the established collection locations. Forward Montana Foundation and volunteers will be responsible for turning in the voter registration forms from the box every week.

Goal II: Center Student Voices in Democratic Engagement Work

- To better reflect the University of Montana's diverse community and elevate marginalized voices, invite leaders from The Branch Center student groups to the Coalition for Civic Engagement this fall, including The Black Student Union, Lambda Alliance, Latine Student Union, and the Pacific Islanders Club.
- Pursue options for hosting a Campus Election Engagement Project (CEEP) Fellow / Civic Influencer on campus now that Montana Campus Compact is transitioning into Montana Campus Network for Civic Engagement.
- Hold space for student voices during coalition meetings and support student ideas.
- Ask student leaders in the coalition to take leadership positions in implementing student-facing initiatives.
- Adhere to campus anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies that protect students from retaliation or harassment, based on ALL of the following; race, religion, national origin, political affiliations, marital status, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or disability.

Goal II. Increase Student Voter Turnout

- Create a satellite elections office in the University Center atrium where students, employees, and community members can register to vote, get a ballot, fill it out and drop off their ballot in one place.
- Collaborate with campus entities to provide a shuttle service during elections.
- Collaborate with Mountain Lion and ASUM Transportation to increase bus routes and frequency to polling locations.
- Unite as a University to communicate the importance of voting. Messaging should come from every department and office, including the Provost, and incorporate different communication methods, including video media.
- Administer surveys to students to capture data on why they did or didn't vote.

Goal III: Expand Voter Education and Civic Learning

- Include important election dates on the UM academic and events calendar to reinforce the importance of elections as a norm, not an elective.
- Create a voter information webpage on UM's website that includes a "Register to Vote" button.
- Share important voter information, such as poll locations, registration FAQ, and election deadlines, with students through a letter from the president, social media posts and videos from the coalition's affiliated offices, tabling at events and independently in the UC and Oval, and other communications.
- Partner with campus departments like Residence Life and the UM Food Pantry to disseminate voter education information more widely to students.
- Host debate watch parties at through University Center student life programming.
- Provide the local elections office a platform to engage with students about the impact voting can have on social issues such as food insecurity through United University Food Friday, a 400-person meal-build service event held in October.
- Offer students experiential learning opportunities to explore social and environmental issues, hands-on, through Alternative Breaks, Service Saturdays and other volunteer events.
- Host the second annual **Campus-wide Democracy Summit** in March, 2025. The inaugural summit took place on March 27, 2024, in conjunction with a President's Lecture visit from noted democracy scholar Danielle Allen. The day featured diverse opportunities to engage students, including student-led activities, faculty voices, creative approaches to participatory dialogues, and performance and art.

- Become the first college in Montana to participate in the **Unify Challenge College Bowl** Fall of 2024 or Spring of 2025. The Unify Challenge College Bowl is a face-to-face video conversation about goals for America between two students with different life experiences. It allows promotes collaborative problem solving and gives students a hands-on way to practice having a respectful, productive dialogue with someone that can offer new perspectives they hadn't considered before.

SECTION VII: TIMELINE

The above activities will take place March 2024 – May 2025, with efforts concentrated between August – November, 2024 leading up to the 2024 presidential Election. The Coalition for Civic Engagement plans to continue its efforts annually and will update its plan each election cycle.

SECTION VIII: REPORTING

The University of Montana will share its Democratic Engagement Action Plan and NSLVE report with its Coalition for Civic Engagement partners and publish it widely through the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge website. Any additional feedback, surveys, and research that reflects democratic engagement at the University of Montana will be incorporated into future Action Plans and made public.

SECTION IX: EVALUATION

The Democratic Engagement Action Plan is a working document that benefits from additional voices, ongoing assessment, and further research. UM's Coalition for Civic Engagement will continue to revise the plan over time as we evaluate how we are meeting our goals. We will also continue to revise the plan to include new perspectives and understandings from our students, institution and community. Results from NSLVE reports, institutional surveys and research, and quantitative and qualitative data from coalition events will inform goal assessments and future action plans.