

# Democratic Engagement Action Plan

## *Michigan Technological University*

May 31, 2022

### **I. Executive Summary**

In the spring of 2022, groups and stakeholders across campus continued to work together to plan engagement efforts to register new voters, address barriers to voting, and educate students on their voting rights and procedures. This plan involves the implementation of many different strategies on our Houghton, MI campus to ensure students are informed and engaged in the democratic process. In order to achieve the goals outlined in this plan, the Student Leadership and Involvement office and the Political Affairs Committee of the Undergraduate Student Government will work with faculty members, staff, and community partners including the League of Women Voters and the offices of the City of Houghton and Houghton County clerks. These partners gave input in developing this plan to increase voter engagement at Michigan Technological University.

While developing this action plan, we are mindful that although there has been progress in recent years, Michigan Tech's registration and voting rates still fall significantly below the national average for public research universities. According to the NSLVE report, Michigan Tech's overall voting rate for the most recent election years was 56.8% in 2020, 26.9% in 2018, and 34.3% in 2016. Michigan Tech was 9% below the national average in 2020, while in 2018 and 2016, the university was about 15% below the national average. There is still a significant amount of work to be done to ensure students are informed and engaged in voting. We aim to achieve a rate of 80% of eligible students registered to vote and a 50% voting rate for the November 2022 election.

Through these efforts, the team of faculty, staff, students, and community partners involved in this plan aim to further the university-wide Undergraduate Student Learning Goal (#8) of Social Responsibility and Ethical Reasoning, which states, "[Students] will understand their role as citizens and their responsibility to work with others in promoting quality of life and a sustainable society." These efforts also align with our institution's values - particularly our value of community, which states "We inspire an engaged community that actively seeks improvement through acceptance and understanding."

While the strategies identified in this plan largely target the fall semester, the working group intends to carry on our work in perpetuity with a particular focus on review and evaluation throughout 2023.

## II. Leadership

### Working Group

There are many diverse groups and stakeholders who are involved in this plan. The team members from Michigan Technological University who have been involved in developing and supporting our action plan include:

- **Kari Henquinet**, Teaching Professor in Anthropology & Pavlis Honors College
- **Richelle Winkler**, Professor of Sociology
- **Ethan Betzoldt**, Undergraduate Student Government Political Affairs Committee Chair
- **Danielle Meiorow**, Coordinator, Student Leadership and Involvement Office
- **Jessie Stapleton**, Director of Student Leadership and Involvement Office
- **Angie Carter**, Associate Professor of Sociology
- **Josh Gostlin**, Residence Education Coordinator
- **Dorianne Shaffer**, Research, Education and Outreach Librarian
- **Malachi Wilson**, Orientation Executive Staff
- **Wallace Southerland III**, Vice President of Student Affairs, Dean of Students
- **Sam Sweitz**, Associate Professor of Anthropology & Archaeology, University Senate President
- **Undergraduate Student Government Political Affairs Committee**
- **Interfraternity Council**
- **Panhellenic Council**
- **Inter-Residence Housing Council**
- **Center for Diversity and Inclusion President's Council**

Community and government partners who have supported our efforts include:

- **League of Women Voters of the Copper Country** (Kari Henquinet)
- **Campus Vote Project** (Landon Myers)
- **ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge** (Ryan Drysdale)
- **Jennifer Kelly**, Houghton County Clerk
- **Ann Vollrath**, City of Houghton Clerk

### Recruitment

New members to the coalition this year include a representative from the library, a representative from Residence Education and Housing Services, and several student organizations. These individuals were strategically recruited based on mission overlap, degree of student contact, work with underrepresented students, and expressed interest.

As the fall election season approaches, the group seeks to add partnerships with additional student organizations who may be able to offer volunteer and programming support for planned initiatives. We also hope to obtain their feedback, so that we may continue to make relevant adjustments for our student body as we implement this year's action plan. We also

hope to better incorporate the Center for Diversity and Inclusion in order to better support students from historically excluded populations in exercising their right to vote.

## **Responsibilities**

The working group does not currently have accountability goals set by the larger institution, nor is there a reporting line for an overarching area of responsibility. All members personally see the value of democratic engagement and the overlap with their roles at the institution and have opted into supporting voter engagement efforts. Each individual seeks to coordinate those efforts from their area of responsibility on campus utilizing the resources, connections, and systems available to them.

The group intends to meet monthly throughout late summer and early fall. We will transition to bi-weekly meetings in September as we prepare for National Voter Registration Day and other planned events and initiatives.

## **Support**

The working group has the administrative support of the Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students, Wallace Southerland III, Ph.D. In his time working with the group, he has already advocated for the group to the University President and other upper administrators on campus. The President of the University Senate has also been actively involved in discussions on this plan and continues to actively partner with the Undergraduate Student Government on election related initiatives.

## **Succession**

Every member of our working group is a volunteer who recognizes the importance of this work in general and on our campus. If a member needs to step away, they will be asked to identify another individual from their area who may be able to take their place. If a member is unable to identify another individual or stops participating without notice, the remaining members will do their best to divide responsibilities and continue with the group's goals.

## **III: Commitment**

Michigan Tech has continued to expand its support of civic learning and democratic engagement in recent years. Social Responsibility and Ethical Reasoning is included as one of eight university-wide Undergraduate Student Learning Goals. It states, "Students are able to identify and address conflicting ethical values and develop a sense of responsibility for the broad impacts of individual actions, social institutions and public policy. They understand their role as

citizens and their responsibility to work with others in promoting quality of life and a sustainable society. Social responsibility, like civic engagement, means promoting the quality of community life through both political and non-political processes. Ethical reasoning is reasoning about right and wrong human conduct.”

This year, the Undergraduate Student Government, under the leadership of then President Zachary Olson, passed a resolution requesting that the University Senate introduce a proposal that prohibits examinations, projects, presentations, and papers on Election Day starting in Fall 2022. The resolution also encourages (but does not require) instructors to release students from all assignments and mandatory class attendance on Election Day, and to continue working with students who must miss class for an Election-related reason to make up any missed assignments or class time. The resolution was approved by the Senate on April 6, 2022 and subsequently by administration on April 22, 2022.

The institution’s commitment is also demonstrated through its participation in NSLVE each year, as well as its involvement with several voter engagement initiatives such as All In, the Campus Vote Project, and Ask Every Student. These partnerships culminated in Michigan Tech being listed as one of America’s Best Colleges for Student Voting by Washington Monthly this past summer. Michigan Tech was one of only nine Michigan schools to be recognized on the list.

## **IV: Landscape**

### **Overview**

Michigan Technological University (Michigan Tech) is a public research university, home to more than 7,000 students from 60 countries around the world. Founded in 1885, the University offers more than 120 undergraduate and graduate degree programs in science and technology, engineering, forestry, business and economics, health professions, humanities, mathematics, and social sciences.

### **Campus Climate**

In general, the current rate of civic and political engagement on campus is low. According to NSLVE data from 2012 through 2020, there has historically been higher voter engagement at Michigan Tech amongst women and students from specific majors like humanities and natural sciences, and lower voter engagement amongst men and students from majors like engineering and computer science. Since men comprise around 75% of the student body and a large percentage of students at Michigan Tech are studying engineering, ensuring that these groups are addressed in efforts will be important in improving the overall rate of engagement. Our strategy is broad in order to reach all students regardless of major through required courses and orientation.

The general education requirements of the institution include civic learning and democratic engagement through the aforementioned University Learning Goal on Social Responsibility and Ethical Reasoning. Every undergraduate student is required to take a course with this learning goal as its foundation, in addition to composition, global issues, and a course focused on critical and creative thinking. Additionally, every undergraduate student must take 12 credits in the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, which further emphasizes this learning goal.

Civic learning and democratic engagement are present in many aspects of the co-curriculum. Our residential communities are divided into “houses” each with individual names and identities. Each house sets its own community guidelines through active dialogue and regular meetings. The residential curriculum actively seeks to teach students conflict resolution skills and social responsibility. We have several student governing bodies on campus including Undergraduate Student Government, Graduate Student Government, and Inter-Residence Housing Council. Each of these groups are active in both community building and advocacy. They come together to speak with university officials through a combined “Student Commission” initiative. Civic engagement is also promoted through the Student Leadership and Involvement office itself through a variety of community service and leadership programs designed to see the benefits of community building, collaboration, and reciprocal relationships. These programs include LeaderShape Institute, Days of Service, and Alternative Spring Breaks. This year, the office will also be launching a new leadership pathway program that encourages student involvement across campus amongst five pillars including global citizenship, leadership, and diversity and inclusion.

## Internal Barriers

- **Financial resources:** In the past, there have not been resources dedicated to improving voter registration and voting rates at Michigan Tech. Through grassroots efforts, a small budget was secured for the fall 2019 voter registration drive. This budget will continue for fall 2022 to support voter registration and will be sustained in the future through the integration of the Undergraduate Student Government and Student Leadership and Involvement office. However, it is a nominal amount that does not allow for grander goal setting.
- **Leadership:** Expanding voter outreach efforts has been limited in the past by the lack of time that committee members have to dedicate outside the normal scope of their responsibilities. Organizing and coordinating efforts to increase voting has also primarily come from faculty and staff taking on the vast majority of responsibilities, with very limited student leadership in efforts. There is still no formally designated employee on campus to support voter engagement initiatives.
- **Apathy:** Because Michigan Tech is a STEM heavy institution and is located in a remote part of the country, students are often apathetic towards social issues. High academic demands further exacerbate this concern. Talking about local issues or getting students to care about issues back in their home precincts is a challenge.

## External Barriers

- **Polling place accessibility:** There are no polling places directly on campus and public transportation to bring students to polling is limited. The nearest polling location is over a mile from campus with significant changes in elevation that make voting difficult for students who lack their own transportation.
- **Steps to request absentee ballots:** Many students are registered to vote in their home districts of Michigan or out-of-state, making it more difficult to vote. Requesting an absentee ballot must be done in advance and at a busy time of the semester for our students. However, recent changes in Michigan law have removed barriers for voting absentee in Michigan. Voters can now request an absentee ballot for any reason and any election. We expect it to be easier for students to do so in 2022, as long as they have the correct information about obtaining and mailing absentee ballots.
- **Midterm Slump:** As occurs around the country, registration and voting rates often drop during the midterm elections for a multitude of reasons. This trend has been observed in Michigan Tech’s student body in the 2018 midterm elections. We anticipate lower voter engagement than the previous election cycle.

## V. Goals and Measures of Success

Registration and Voting Rates of Michigan Tech Students vs. Average Rates

|              | Michigan Tech |      |      |                  | National Average |      |      |
|--------------|---------------|------|------|------------------|------------------|------|------|
|              | 2016          | 2018 | 2020 | 2022<br>(Target) | 2016             | 2018 | 2020 |
| % Registered | 62.3          | 61.2 | 78.2 | 80               | 75               | 75   | 82.1 |
| % Voted      | 34.3          | 26.9 | 56.8 | 50               | 50.4             | 39.1 | 66   |

### Short-Term Goals

- **Increase registration and voting rate:** Michigan Tech’s goal for the 2022 election cycle is to increase both registered voters and voter participation. We aim to achieve a rate of 80% of eligible students registered to vote and a 50% voting rate in the next NSLVE report for the 2022 election, an increase of about 18 and 23 percentage points from the last midterm elections, respectively. In light of the increases in past years and changes in Michigan law, the committee believes this is an attainable goal.
- **Integrate voter outreach across the University:** Building upon prior efforts to engage students within courses, we have key faculty on board to discuss voting and civic engagement as well as information on registration and voting in first-year, general education, and other appropriate courses. We have also strategically recruited members to the working group who represent a wider breath of campus to enhance engagement in our efforts.

- **Build a voter engagement webpage:** In consultation with the Dean of Students and the Student Leadership and Involvement office, the working group will determine an appropriate location for a voter engagement landing page to display permanent information about registering to vote and requesting an absentee ballot. This task will be completed by the start of the Fall semester.
- **Increase visibility of university administrators commitment to civic engagement:** During the 2022 election cycle, we want it to be apparent to students that our Dean of Students and President recognize the importance of civic engagement and support students in exercising their right to vote. Through directed asks we will seek:
  - An email to all students on the importance of civic engagement and participating in elections from the University President,
  - Consistent reminders on voting deadlines and opportunities for civic engagement in monthly emails sent from the Dean of Students, and
  - a “All In” presidential commitment to Full Student Voter Participation

## Long-Term Goals

- **Create a sustainable leadership plan for increasing voter engagement and outreach:** In past years, the team has been composed primarily of faculty and a few staff from across campus who have loosely organized to lead voter engagement efforts over the past three years. In the fall 2019 voter registration drive, we involved undergraduate student government and the Student Leadership and Involvement Office more directly in our coordination and planning. During 2022, one of the goals is to create a more sustainable, long-term leadership structure and home for these efforts within Michigan Tech. The goal is to assist the Undergraduate Student Government Political Affairs Committee, which is overseen by staff in the Student Leadership and Involvement Office, in understanding the responsibilities and accumulated knowledge for voter engagement efforts on campus as they move into a bigger leadership role. Other staff and faculty will continue to collaborate in successfully integrating these events and strategies into the curriculum and regular events.
- **Commitment from University leadership to secure and maintain an on-campus polling location:** While once hosted in the University’s Student Development complex, there is currently not an on-campus polling location. The city and county clerk have both voiced support for returning the polling location to Tech’s campus. The working group will continue to advocate for its return with the goal of it returning prior to the 2024 primaries.

## VI: 2022 Strategy

**Orientation:** An important part of the 2022 strategy to increase student voter registration is to continue integrating civic engagement into orientation week programming (all new students attend orientation the week prior to classes starting in the fall). During the Spring 2022 semester, committee members started working with the Waino Wahtera Center for Student

Success, which leads orientation programming, to plan voter registration activities during orientation week. Currently, plans include:

- A voter registration and absentee voting information table at the initial student check-in
- A required module on the online orientation course that shares information on voter registration, absentee voting, and trends at Michigan Tech.
- Advertisement reminders to register and request absentee ballots during large events.
- A table at Afternoon on the Town (an event where students get to explore the local community) hosted by League of Women Voters.

**Class involvement:** In fall of 2020, a shareable Canvas module was introduced to easily allow faculty to share voter information with their classes. This task was regularly offered as extra credit or as required course material. The module will be updated for the Fall 2022 semester and promoted to faculty through departmental meetings, our daily “Tech Today” newsletter for faculty and staff, and through meetings with the Deans conducted through Undergraduate Student Government.

For Fall 2022, the Committee will also work to expand the network of faculty involved in voter efforts and bring more classes into voter registration and education efforts including required first-year classes and other general education classes. These classes could include SS 2610 Intro to Law and Society, SS 3661 Constitutional Law, SS 2600 American Government, SS 2100 Introduction to Cultural Anthropology, first year Engineering Fundamentals courses, and UN 1025 Global Issues.

**Voter registration drives:** Voter registration drives on campus have been successful at increasing student registration rates on campus. This year we will host multiple registration drives.

*National Voter Registration Day:* As in previous years, stations around campus will be staffed by volunteers and equipped with voter registration forms, absentee ballot request forms, and laptops for volunteers to check students’ registration status. The event will run for at least 3 hours in main locations across campus. The target date for this event is on National Voter Registration Day - September 20, 2022.

*Additional tabling events:* Additional efforts to support voter registration will occur through tabling during targeted events. The Undergraduate Student Government will lead these efforts at K-Day (our student organization fair) and other large student events that are planned in the fall.

**Absentee ballot request distribution:** During the voter registration drive, volunteers will also provide absentee ballot request forms for students if they would like to vote in their home state or district. In previous years, there was high demand for absentee requests so each station around campus will be equipped with plenty of request forms for Michigan and neighboring states. These efforts will be continued after the drives through key front desks on campus including in the residence halls, the library, and the Undergraduate Student Government office.

**Voter education:** Another important component of the fall voter outreach efforts will be voter education. The Undergraduate Student Government Political Affairs Committee will take the lead in providing educational opportunities for students on voting and civic engagement. We will also highlight and support annual fall events for Constitution Day to encourage civic engagement.

*Living Room Conversations* Living Room Conversations is an open source non-profit that works to heal society by connecting people across divides - politics, age, gender, race, nationality, and more – through guided conversations proven to build understanding and transform communities. Major disagreement on important issues is a fact of life, but it doesn't have to create insurmountable divides. Under the leadership of the Undergraduate Student Government Political Affairs Committee, student organizations will be invited to lead conversations for their peers. Through applying and adapting the conversational model, we hope participants will build relationships that generate understanding and enable collaborative problem-solving. Proposed topics include:

- [The America We Want to Be](#)
- [American Culture: Melting pot or salad bowl or something else?](#)
- [Climate Change](#)
- [Faith and the LGBTQ+ Community](#)
- [Student Debt](#)
- [Women in Society](#)

*Candidate Forums* The USG Political Affairs Committee will seek and invite candidates to forum discussions on campus. Should we be successful in garnering interest from campaign offices, the events will be marketed to students and they will be invited to submit questions or topics for discussion. The chair will contact all candidates from a minimum of three election offices to seek interest.

*Constitution Day* In collaboration with the University Libraries, we will display an interactive exhibit on the gallery wall of the library about voting rights, MTU's voter engagement, and information about this year's election. The gallery is located in a major thoroughfare of one of our most active buildings on campus. The display will span the week of Constitution Day ensuring that it remains up through National Voter Registration Day.

**Student Organization Registration Drive:** A component of the fall voter registration efforts will be a challenge between student organizations such as Greek life, CDI organizations, and other interested RSOs. Student organizations that have success at registering voters will be eligible to win prizes. We will also explore options to bring this competition campus wide and compete against Northern Michigan University.

**Marketing and Communication:** When asked about why students didn't vote, they often state they just didn't know. Our goal is for every student to know through a mass marketing campaign this fall. There will be two major pushes: voter registration and absentee voting. The voter registration push will center around National Voter Registration Day (September 17-24) and the absentee voting push will precede Vote Early Day to ensure the timely arrival of absentee

ballots (October 15-22). Each initiative will span as much of the marketing space on campus as possible, including:

- a poster campaign
- table tents
- electronic display systems
- FilmBoard Ad (on-campus film group)
- Lode Ad (Student Newspaper)
- Social Media Accounts of campus partners (USG, SLI, Residence Education, etc.)

We will also work with the Dean of Students to add regular voting related reminders to monthly email updates and other forms of official communication.

## 2022 Schedule

The following is a proposed timeline for voter registration and outreach efforts during the remainder of the calendar year.

### Summer 2022

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|--|
| June/July: Finalize Canvas course for Orientation Executive Staff                                |
| July: Draft all mass marketing materials for voter registration and absentee voting              |
| After August 2nd Primaries: Invite candidates to participate in candidate forums on campus       |
| August: Hold planning meeting to finalize orientation activities                                 |
| August 15: Announce Canvas module for Faculty in Tech Today                                      |
| Late August: Invite registered Student Organizations to participate in Living Room Conversations |
| August 27: An Afternoon on the Town tabling event  |

### Fall 2022

|   |
|---|
| Late August: Orientation activities for new student voter registration including tables at student check-in and other events.                           |
| Early September: Voter Registration Day planning meeting; distribute information to classes   |
| September 9th: Host voter registration and education table at K-Day, a university-wide event where students can explore different student organizations |
| September 17th: Constitution week display on voting in the library.   |
| September 17-24: Mass marketing campaign on voter registration.   |
| September 20: Voter registration day and absentee ballot distribution coordinated with local clerks.  |
| October 15-22: Mass marketing campaign on Absentee Voting   |
| Election day, November: Work with student groups to remind students to get out and vote   |

## VII: Reporting

When a web page has been established for Voter Engagement, this plan and past NSLVE reports will be linked and available for viewing. An article will be shared in Tech Today, our daily newsletter for faculty and staff, and the Student Scoop, our weekly student newsletter, announcing the new webpage and the plan for the coming year. The plan will also be discussed during the online training for registered student organizations re-registration process.

Once data has been compiled from the 2022 election, we will share results from the 2022 action plan amongst team members, university officials, and publicly via the:

- All In website
- Undergraduate Student Government (USG)
- Student Leadership and Involvement office
- A press release in our daily Tech Today newsletter and weekly Student Scoop

During the fall semester, we will also work to identify other places to publicly share the results of these efforts so that they can gain greater recognition among students, faculty, and staff.

## VIII: Evaluation

When available, we will obtain new NSLVE data to review any changes in the fall 2022 election compared to the last midterm election to evaluate if we have met our goals. We will also internally track (in collaboration with city and county clerks) new registrations for Michigan and how many absentee ballot requests were handed out at campus events for reporting efforts. QR codes with click tracking from Bitly will also be utilized to quantify the number of students who check their registration status or scanned in to request an absentee ballot.

Both mass marketing campaigns will also contain QR codes with click tracking to determine which methods of advertising were the most effective at getting students to check their status and request absentee ballots.

Results of the student organization registration drive will also be analyzed to determine if these targeted efforts at specific student groups resulted in a greater proportion of registrations than the general student body. This would support further efforts towards targeted student populations and competition style drives for future years.

As in previous years, qualitative feedback will be gathered from the faculty, staff, and students that are part of the voter outreach and engagement efforts to identify any areas for improvement in future election cycles. In the past, this feedback has been invaluable in improving voter outreach efforts and addressing any issues that have arisen.

These results and metrics will be discussed over the course of 2023 to determine what changes and opportunities exist for future years to better support our efforts and expand impact.