

Michigan Technological University ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge 2020 Action Plan

May 29, 2020

I. Executive Summary

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.

Michigan Tech joined the ALL IN Democracy Challenge in 2017. A team of students, faculty, staff, and community partners have coordinated annual voter registration events over the last three years resulting in about 500 new Michigan voter registrations. In that time, progress has been made towards increasing voter engagement, based on National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) data. From the 2014 midterm election to the 2018 midterm election, the Michigan Tech student voting rate increased by about 18%. Student voter registrations also increased in this time period by about 10%.

In the spring of 2020, groups and stakeholders across campus continued to work together to plan engagement efforts on campus in order to register new voters, address barriers to voting, and provide education to students to inform them about their voting rights and procedures. This plan involves the implementation of many different strategies to ensure students are informed and engaged in voter registration and voting. In order to achieve the goals outlined in this plan by the end of 2020, 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 26.9% in 2018 and 34.3% in 2016. Both were about 15% below the national average, so there is still a significant amount of work to be done to ensure students are informed and engaged in voting.

This team is also working to institutionalize voter registration within orientation activities and required courses for first-year students and high enrollment general education courses. Through these initiatives, 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.”

II. Leadership

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**, Principal Lecturer in Anthropology & Pavlis Honors College
- **Richelle Winkler**, Professor of Sociology
- **Angie Carter**, Assistant Professor of Sociology
- **Blair Orr**, Professor in College of Forest Resources and Environmental Science
- **David Watkins**, Professor in Civil and Environmental Engineering
- **Susanna Peters**, Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences, Law and Society Program
- **Adam Wellstead**, Professor of Public Policy
- **Mark Rouleau**, Associate Professor of Social Sciences
- **Beka Horsch**, Coordinator of Student Leadership and Involvement Office
- **Jessie Stapleton**, Director of Student Leadership and Involvement Office
- **Stefani Vargas Krause**, Coordinator of Student Leadership and Involvement Office
- **Zachary Olson**, Undergraduate Student Government Political Affairs Committee
- **Bryce Walbrun**, Undergraduate Student Government Political Affairs Committee
- **Elise Cheney-Makens**, Pavlis Honors College
- **Bonnie Gorman**, Dean of Students
- **Lorelle Meadows**, Dean of Pavlis Honors College
- **Alan Turnquist**, Orientation Programs Coordinators
- **Heather Simpson**, Associate Director of Waino Wahtera Center for Student Success
- **Zoe Ketola**, Alum & Michigan Secretary of State Collegiate Student Advisory Task Force

Community and government partners include:

- **League of Women Voters of the Copper Country**
- **Jennifer Kelly**, Houghton County Clerk
- **Ann Vollrath**, City of Houghton Clerk
- **Michigan Secretary of State Office** (mobile office)

III: Goals and Measures of Success

Short-Term Goals

- **Increase registration and voting rate:** Michigan Tech’s goal for the 2020 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 2020 election, an increase of about 18 and 16 percentage points, respectively. In light of the increases in past years, the committee believes this is an attainable goal. Our biggest event planned for fall is a voter registration day in coordination with the Michigan Secretary of State mobile office, scheduled for September 15.

- **Integrate voter outreach across the University:** During fall 2020, 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 will also do outreach during new student orientation. We have worked with the orientation staff to include information in a student mailer, and are planning to have opportunities to encourage voter registration during new student orientation in fall 2020 with informational tables and collaboration with the League of Women Voters in a student-focused event downtown. Working with the undergraduate student government, we will also get the word out during a student organization recruiting event (“K-Day”) in early fall. If these events cannot be face-to-face due to the pandemic, we are prepared to coordinate virtually with our partners to ensure students know how to register and have applications to absentee ballots.

	Michigan Tech			National Average		
	2016	2018	2020 (target)	2016	2018	2020
% Registered	62.3	61.2	80	75	75	--
% Voted	34.3	26.9	50	50.4	39.1	--

Long-Term Goals

- **Continue to 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 2020, 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 collaborating staff and faculty will continue to collaborate in successfully integrating these events and strategies into the curriculum and regular events.
- **Increase commitment from University leadership:** Michigan Tech’s mission statement and university learning goals for Michigan Tech emphasize civic engagement and social responsibility. We continue to communicate our successes and challenges in voter registration and engagement with the senior leadership of the university as we seek additional support for these efforts. This is challenging in the current pandemic environment; however, we will continue to highlight the impact small investments can have as students become more informed and engaged in their government at all levels. As one step in this direction, our university president encouraged all students to participate in the census during spring term. One of our goals for 2020 is to increase commitment and support for student voter engagement at the upper levels of the University.

IV: Landscape

Campus Climate

In general, the current rate of civic and political engagement on campus is low. According to NSLVE data from 2012 through 2018, 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 to reach all students, regardless of major through required courses and orientation.

However, there has been an upward trend in Michigan Tech student voter engagement in recent years possibly due to greater outreach efforts—and support for these efforts—from groups and stakeholders across campus.

Internal Barriers

- **Financial resources:** In the past, there had 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 2020 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.
- **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.

External Barriers

- **Polling place accessibility:** There are no polling places directly on campus and there is no readily-available public transportation to bring students to polling. The nearest polling location is within walking distance to campus, but this may still make voting difficult for some students who lack their own transportation.
- **Steps for submission for absentee ballots:** Many students are registered to vote in their home districts of Michigan or are out-of-state, making it more difficult to vote. However, recent changes in Michigan law have removed some 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 2020, as long as they have the correct information about obtaining and mailing absentee ballots.
- **Voter registration:** Until recently registration in Michigan operated on an opt-in basis and historically has been conducted primarily by mailing in an application, both of which have been a barrier for students registering to vote. Recent changes in Michigan law have also significantly altered registration procedures. Now, when Michigan citizens apply for or update their driver's license or personal ID cards, they are automatically

registered to vote (unless they are ineligible or opt out). Additionally, any Michigan resident with a state-issued driver's license or ID can register to vote online. Finally, Michigan now allows residents to register on election day either at a clerk's office or in-person at a polling station. These changes should significantly decrease the barrier for many students who would like to register.

V: 2020 Strategy

Orientation: An important part of the 2020 strategy to increase student voter registration is by integrating it into orientation week programming (all new students attend orientation the week prior to classes starting in the fall) and coordinating with the Michigan Secretary of State mobile office for a voter registration day. During the Spring 2020 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 information table at the initial student check-in
- A discussion about voting (including registration, absentee voting, and goal to have all eligible students register and vote) hosted by Orientation Team Leaders (OTLs) when students meet in their small groups (Orientation Teams) during orientation
- 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: Student involvement in voter registration initiatives have been essential in increasing voter registration and voting rates at Michigan Tech. For the past three years, students from the SS 2700 Introduction to Sociology have served as volunteers for the annual campus voter registration drive. The committee also coordinated with a required first-year general education class to hand out forms and encourage students to register to vote. For Fall 2020, the Committee will 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 2700 Introduction to Sociology, SS 2100 Introduction to Cultural Anthropology, and UN 1025 Global Issues.

Voter registration drive: The voter registration drive on campus has been successful at increasing student registration rates on campus. On September 15, there will be a mobile Secretary of State office on campus to assist with voter registration efforts and distribution of applications for absentee ballots. 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.

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 ballots so each station around campus will be equipped with plenty of request forms for Michigan and neighboring states.

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 thinking of ways to educate students on voting and civic engagement. We will also highlight and support annual fall events for Constitution Day to encourage civic engagement.

VI: 2020 Schedule

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

Summer 2020

July/August: Confirm plans with orientation planners. Coordinate with all team members to assess and, if necessary, modify plans for fall semester in accordance with any regulations and best practices for reducing the spread of COVID. This may include transitioning planned activities to virtual formats or coming up with alternate activities.
August: Confirm and coordinate with Secretary of State mobile office and modify planned visit if necessary
August: Hold planning meeting to finalize orientation activities

Fall 2020

Late August: Orientation activities for new student voter registration including tables at student check-in and other events, discussions during small-group meetings, and an optional info session for students wishing to learn more
Early September: Voter Registration Day planning meeting; distribute information to classes
Early September: Host voter registration and education table at K-Day, a university-wide event where students can explore different student organizations
September 15: Voter registration day and absentee ballot distribution coordinated with Secretary of State mobile office
October and November: Follow up with email reminders to students about deadlines to register to vote and election day
Election day, November: Work with student groups to remind students to get out and vote

VII: Evaluation and Reporting

When available, we will obtain new NSLVE data to review any changes in the fall 2020 election compared to the last presidential election to evaluate if we have met our goals. We will also internally track (in collaboration with the SOS mobile office and/or city and county clerks) new registrations for Michigan and how many absentee ballots were handed out at campus events for reporting efforts.

Additionally, 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.

Once data has been compiled for 2020, we plan to share results from the 2020 action plan amongst team members, university officials, and publicly via the:

- All In website
- Pavlis Honors College website
- Undergraduate Student Government (USG)
- Student Leadership and Involvement office

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: COVID-19

Due to the novel coronavirus, there is great uncertainty right now across Michigan Tech, the state of Michigan, and the entire US as to what the fall semester will look like, what voting in the November 2020 election will look like, and more. While we cannot accurately predict now how this will affect our efforts to increase voter engagement, we anticipate that it will necessitate some changes and alterations to our plan, especially regarding activities that were planned to involve in-person contact.

As more information becomes available during the summer and early fall, we will appropriately adjust our efforts to reflect current guidelines and best practices issued by Michigan Tech, the state of Michigan, and the federal government. We will work diligently to ensure that students have up-to-date information regarding voting procedures and are prepared to vote, however this may look. We know that now, more than ever, students' voices matter and we will continually work to empower students to seek out information and exercise their right to vote during this difficult and uncertain time.