



SCHOLARS
STRATEGY NETWORK

Tripling the College Student Vote in Ann Arbor

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University of Michigan-Ann Arbor (UM) student voting turnout in the 2014 midterm election was only 14 percent, and the turnout in 2016 was only 44 percent. Both figures were well below average. If I (and my colleagues) were teaching effectively, how could student turnout be so low?

Two years later, in the 2018 midterms, our campus student turnout tripled to 41 percent. Turnout also jumped at the 14 universities in the Big Ten. These encouraging results reflect several initiatives pursued simultaneously after an assessment of the likely drivers of the low turnout on our campus.

The Assessment

Conversations with students, staff, and faculty identified three critical disconnects on our campus:



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1. The Educational Challenge for Students

We needed to help students understand how specific public policies they care about are affected by various congressional, state, and local elected positions.

2. The Academic-Citizen Engagement Disconnect

Reaching all individual students effectively required institutional adjustments to address the other two disconnects, rooted in how citizen engagement activities were organized on our campus. Prior nonpartisan efforts at UM had been led by undergraduate student government and the Ginsberg Center for Civic Engagement (reporting to our Vice President of Student Life). Not only were other university leaders uninvolved but so was the entire academic side of our university.

3. The Undergraduate-Graduate Student Disconnect

Nonpartisan efforts to promote student voting at UM focused on undergraduates and virtually ignored our large and important graduate and professional student population. We were unable to find a workable model to incorporate graduate students into existing student voting efforts, so we developed our own.

The Big Ten Voting Challenge (BTVC)

Launching the **Big Ten Voting Challenge**—a friendly contest among the 14 universities in the conference—helped us address all three disconnects. The Challenge: 1) provided a presidential endorsement; 2) necessitated a campus-wide coalition; and 3) produced a student-led effort enabled by faculty and administrators.



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1. *The Presidential Endorsement*

In the spring of 2017, our president, Mark Schlissel, agreed to approach the other 13 leaders of universities in the Big Ten and ask if they would join him in a Big Ten Voting Challenge for 2018. Very quickly they all agreed, even though state election rules varied in ways that created a very uneven playing field for the contest. All of the campus leaders thought we could do much better.

Presidential endorsements are important in bringing the entire campus into the effort, enabling vital access to new student orientation, a wonderful way to help large numbers of undergraduate students get themselves registered to vote as they enter the university. Student government had long sought such access without success. Presidential support also meant we could set up meetings with all 19 deans plus the athletic director. This helped us reach graduate and professional students and sports teams. Working with deans also gave us access to faculty.

2. *A Campus-Wide Coalition*

In 2017, we formed a student-faculty-staff group called Turn Up Turnout (TUT) that welcomed undergraduate and graduate students and interested faculty (including retired faculty) and staff from across the university. This group is housed in the Department of Political Science, but its reach is campus-wide. TUT works in close partnership with the Ginsberg Center for Civic Engagement, the university unit officially responsible for the Big Ten Voting Challenge. The president and vice president of TUT are undergraduates and the secretary is a graduate student who provide essential student leadership and creativity for all of our activities.

3. *A Student-Led Effort, Enabled by Faculty and Staff*

We believe our students have better ideas about messaging to their peers than do our staff or faculty, and we rely on our students to lead that effort. We also turn to them to help plan and staff events that are fun and engaging for other students. What works for undergraduates does not necessarily work for graduate and professional students, so having both in TUT helps.

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Faculty are also important to our coalition. Some use class time to ask students to check their registrations, get registered to vote, or request an absentee ballot. Some add registration deadlines and Election Day to their syllabi and provide flexibility to students who may be late to class when they stand in lines to vote. Deans may encourage faculty to get involved, but individual faculty members decide. Faculty members in the coalition ask their colleagues to help.

Without staff participation, we would have accomplished very little. Our staff helped us reserve spaces, distribute forms and stamps, set up online stations for voter registration, distribute messages by newsletter and social media, provide food, and pay our bills. They offered creative ideas and launched online discussions of plans to vote. Staff members are the essential partners that keep efforts on track; they recognize opportunities that never occur to students or faculty.

Results to Date

Every Big Ten university increased its student voting rate in 2018 as compared with 2014. The student vote at conference institutions as a whole increased by 2.6 times. An athletic conference challenge is not right for every campus, but finding a way to have the university president endorse a campus effort, building an all-campus coalition to plan and execute a strategy that fits the campus culture, and empowering the students to learn and lead are important steps. The Big Ten Voting Challenge for 2020 is already underway.



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Edie Goldenberg is Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the University of Michigan. She is currently the faculty director of Turn Up Turnout (TUT), an...