

Background: The University of Montana is a flagship public university in Missoula, Montana. We are a broad-access institution with an undergraduate student body that is 33% Pell-eligible and 38% first-generation. We also serve a large and growing population of veterans, reservists, and Indigenous students. Between 2011 and 2018, UM experienced significant enrollment declines (from roughly 16,000 to 10,000 students) due to the confluence of four factors: poor leadership; the first of the football-related sexual assault scandals that swept the nation in the 2010s (see the bestselling [book](#) by John Krakauer); a shift in student preferences away from liberal arts degrees toward engineering (offered only at Montana's other flagship university, Montana State, where enrollment increased by almost 3,000 students over the same period); and a growing backlash toward higher education in Montana. Since our current president took office in 2018, however, our enrollment has stabilized and, over the past three years, started to recover.

I mention this background because it has significant implications for our efforts to promote democracy education at UM. Despite widespread support on campus, we are and will continue to be, for the foreseeable future, operating under significant financial constraints, political pressures, and uncertainty regarding long-term enrollment trends and state support for higher education.

Civics at UM: Traditionally, civics and democracy education at UM has been the province of two institutions: the [Mike and Maureen Mansfield Center](#) and the University President's Office. Since our current president took office, in 2018, the primary focus of both groups has been to organize public-facing events featuring prominent academics, politicians, and public intellectuals. To the extent that one-time events can be an effective mechanism for democracy education, these lectures and dialogues have been highly successful: they attract large audiences of students, faculty, staff, and community members and engage them with a diverse and genuinely impressive range of voices. Since in-person events resumed in 2022, for example, speakers have included Danielle Allen, Rowena He, Condoleezza Rice, Peter Hessler, Liz Cheney, Larry Diamond, Lerone Martin, Marie Yovanovitch, and Ross Douthat, as well as a range of lower-profile but equally fascinating events, such as a conversation with the presidents of the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute.

Alongside the aforementioned speaker series, two ongoing efforts led by the Mansfield Center and the President's Office deserve mention here.

- Prompted by the Montana legislature's recent decision (enacted in 2023 but clearly signaled in advance) to require civics classes at the high school level, the Mansfield Center has been investing in democracy education at the K-12 level (by, for example, creating curricular materials for use in middle- and high-schools across the state).
- Last year, President Bodnar identified "civil dialogue" as one of our top institutional priorities and, as the centerpiece of these efforts, supported the creation of an annual [Democracy Summit](#) which brings students, elected officials, faculty, staff, and community members into conversation on a range of topics from local issues (e.g., the current debate in Montana over the use of university IDs for voter identification), to the relationship between academic freedom and democracy, to democracy in Russia. Though initially skeptical of the organizer's approach, I came away genuinely impressed by both the extent and the nature of participation in the summit. This program, which is expected to repeat every year, will be the centerpiece of UM's efforts to promote civic dialogue moving forward.

Curricular Efforts: Unfortunately, UM’s efforts to promote democracy education in Montana public schools and through one-time, public-facing events has not been matched by efforts to build democracy education into the curriculum at UM. Up through the present year, in fact, democracy education at UM has been limited to a (largely meaningless, given the way in which it is implemented) requirement that students take at least one course that fulfills a “democracy” distribution requirement and individual classes taught in the School of Journalism and the College of Humanities and Sciences.

Changing this unsatisfactory status quo has been one of my major goals since arriving at UM in the fall of 2020. In 2021, I joined an ad hoc committee of the Faculty Senate tasked with revising UM’s General Education (GenEd) curriculum. Over the course of 18 months, we developed a new GenEd model centered on a core course in democracy education that would be taken by all incoming students. Ultimately, our proposed model was not implemented, due to the departure of our then-provost, resistance among the faculty to *other* aspects of the proposed reform (esp. changes to distribution requirements that were thought to adversely affect certain departments), and concerns about our ability to develop, implement, and (especially) staff a core course on an accelerated timeline. Despite the failure of our proposed reform, however, I was encouraged by the overwhelmingly positive reaction, from all aspects of the campus community, toward the idea of democracy education—up to and including the idea of a core requirement.

Since the Ad Hoc Committee on General Education was disbanded, I have been working with a group of colleagues based primarily (but not exclusively; my co-PI on one of the grants referenced below is senior-associate dean of the Franke College of Forestry and Conservation, UM’s best-resourced unit) in the Departments of History and Political Science to build democracy education into the curriculum in other ways—through alternative pathways that avoid, or at least mitigate, the issues that undermined our attempt to put democracy education at the heart of a new GenEd curriculum.

Our current plan has three components: an interdisciplinary minor in Democracy Studies, which will become active in Fall 2024; a major and certificate in Democracy Studies, which we hope to propose during AY 2024-25; and a first-year civics initiative that will work within the existing GenEd model to provide a large (and, we hope, constantly increasing) percentage of UM students with a common intellectual experience focused on democracy education in their first year at UM.

This three-part plan sidesteps potential controversies by taking wholesale reform of the GenEd curriculum off the table—at least temporarily. To address concerns about our ability to implement and staff new courses, we have sought outside funding to support the first-year initiative and the major. To support the former, we have requested funding from the Teagle Foundation. We expect to receive an initial planning grant in May and plan to apply for a larger implementation grant in Spring 2025. Tryg and Third Way Civics have kindly offered to help me design a pilot course, which I will teach in Fall 2024. To support the major, we have applied for a grant from the Mellon Foundation and expect to learn the result of our grant application in late summer 2024. We are confident that, if we are able to bootstrap these initiatives using existing resources and external funding, President Bodnar will make democracy education a top fundraising priority. Indeed, he has repeatedly indicated his eagerness to do so, once we can provide him with a successful program to highlight in fundraising appeals. From our perspective, therefore, the crucial thing is to find the resources necessary to take the first step.

Strengths, weaknesses; challenges, solutions:

By way of conclusion, I'd like to mention a set of opportunities and challenges that should give you all a sense of both the promises and perils facing democracy education at UM.

- Opportunity: Broad support from administrators (including the president and provost), faculty (including all relevant committees of the Faculty Senate), students, and staff (including the Director of the Mansfield Center) for democracy education.
- Opportunity: Critical mass of faculty with relevant expertise and commitment to democracy education, not only in History and Political Science, but also the School of Journalism, the School of Law, and the College of Arts and Media.
- Challenge: Underinvestment in core disciplines (e.g., failure to replace tenure lines in History, Political Science, and Classics) make it difficult for existing faculty to take on new teaching responsibilities, even when they want to. In my case, for example, UM's ability to offer a Classics major depends on me teaching at least two Latin classes and one ancient history survey course every year. Consequently, I will be teaching the pilot course referenced above as an overload.
- Challenge: Scarce resources and high levels of uncertainty regarding enrollment trends and state support for higher education make it difficult for administrators to fund long-term obligations, such as tenure lines, and leads them to prefer one-time events like the Democracy Summit.
- Opportunity: Key supporters, such as President Bodnar (a West Point graduate, Green Beret, and combat veteran) and former Montana governor Marc Racicot (former RNC Chair, Chair of the Bush-Cheney Re-elect, current Chair of the Mansfield Center Advisory Board) are not academics, and their backgrounds make them well suited to promoting democracy education in a state like Montana.
- Challenge: Key supporters, such as President Bodnar and former governor Racicot are not academics, and their backgrounds lead them to underestimate the central importance of curriculum, become impatient with the glacial pace of curricular reform, and prefer solutions that promise instant results.
- Opportunity: The Mansfield Center is well-funded and very well-connected—both in- and outside of Montana. Accordingly, it has great upside as a potential ally.
- Challenge: The Mansfield Center dominates fundraising in the democracy/civics space, but its primary commitment is to public-facing engagement and initiatives rather than curriculum at UM.