America 250, Civic Engagement, and Leadership

Alissa Burger, Associate Professor of English
Chad DeWaard, Professor of Political Science
Scott Giltner, Professor of History
Robert Mevissen, Assistant Professor of History
Andy Walsh, Professor of Religion and Philosophy

As the nation prepares to commemorate America 250 this summer, we sat down with faculty members from Culver-Stockton College's Department of Civic Engagement and Leadership to consider the importance of these practices and the role of the humanities in American life in 2026.

How do you define civic engagement and leadership, and what do you see as the role and importance of these qualities in our contemporary society?

DEWAARD: Civic engagement and leadership are any and all individual or group activities that contribute to the well-being of public communities. Activism, volunteerism, and service come to mind when I think of engagement. Leadership comes in many forms, but essentially is serving as an example of a civically-minded or engaged member of the community. Civic engagement is critically important in maintaining a robust and resilient civil society. Civil society exists as the foundation for both ethical and productive economic and political systems. It provides guardrails against abuses of power. A healthy, functioning, and united democracy relies on a civil society that values and promotes decency, dignity, liberty, and active citizenship.

GILTNER: I define both civic engagement and leadership, at core, not as an action but an attitude that creates action. Fundamentally, it comes from people a) who care about others and understand that we are all in this together; b) who are informed and engaged with events in their community and beyond; and c) who put their words into action by getting involved. I think of it like a middle school teacher taking attendance. Just being there is not enough. You have to be present and prepared. That's a huge challenge for us today: finding people motivated to be informed and to be involved for the sake of the public good. Leadership cannot exist without real concern for others and effective civic engagement cannot be had without real effort. Empathy and care for others seems to be in shorter supply these days, as is optimism for some people. We need people to model leadership and civic involvement as much as possible, as a means to push back against that lack of empathy and concern for others. Now more than ever, civic engagement and leadership doesn't mean just getting involved but getting *others* involved. So much of the contemporary public sphere seems to stifle exchange of ideas, encourage rudeness and hostility, and reward bad faith argument. Humanities scholars should work to remind us that we are in this together and we must root our discussions in principle and lived experience.

MEVISSEN: I think that here at Culver-Stockton, what we really want to emphasize when we're educating our students is that when they graduate from here, and even when they're students here, that they have to be thinking a little bit outside of themselves. Of course, they might get involved in their communities, their churches, their sports teams, anything like that. But this component of civic engagement really also implies that they're engaging with the political process, that they're engaging with officials and institutions that help shape the broader context in which they live. And I think for a lot of those students who are maybe not accustomed to that power, they may find it either intimidating or for some, they may feel a little bit disenfranchised. They don't realize that by being active and finding opportunities to reach out to people or institutions that shape their lives that they can actually make a positive difference. And so one thing that is really critical is for us to give students those tools and competencies to feel confident enough to really engage, to be leaders in ways that help them to shape the world that they live in for the better.

WALSH: My first thought when I hear about civic engagement is voting, at all levels—city, county, state, federal. But being aware of what is happening and the role we can play in democracy is only the tip of the iceberg. To be involved in civic engagement and leadership goes beyond partisan politics to include seeing the needs of others and responding with compassion, intelligence, and the goal of genuinely helping others. This might include working in a food pantry, serving on the local library board, coaching a pee wee baseball team, going to camp with a Scout troop, volunteering in an afterschool program, etc. It is about recognizing the needs of others and how your own particular skill set can enable you to make a positive difference in your communities.

As we consider the American 250 celebrations going on this summer, how do you think different American values have influenced how we remember or commemorate historical moments, and how do you think this has changed at different points in history?

DEWAARD: No doubt that various communities in America will view the anniversary differently. Socio-economic standing goes a long way in how Americans will or won’t celebrate 250 years. Historically marginalized communities may find little to celebrate. Moreover, the nation is politically polarized and the anniversary will thus likely evoke mixed emotions. Further, we live in geopolitically turbulent times that may depress widespread celebration. All this to say that 250 is a remarkable achievement for this democratic, federal republic. The nation has withstood and overcome serious challenges. It has endured many crises and evolved into a more inclusive, prosperous, and powerful nation. For much of my lifetime, the US has been (at least rhetorically) a beacon of hope and the willing and necessary leader of the free world. The United States had been the indispensable nation throughout the 20th century. Its power and influence around the world were generally viewed as necessary and even noble (there were exceptions, of

course). Some will celebrate the triumph and glory of American "exceptionalism." Some will observe 250 as an occasion to reminisce on better days. Some will call on 250 to reassert core values of the founding. My hope is that most will regard 250 as an opportunity to recognize American achievements and reinvest in a united nation.

GILTNER: From a historical standpoint, major anniversaries are interesting to reflect on. I've heard many people indicate that this celebration is different given our political division, but I would argue that it is just like other major celebrations. The centennial in 1876 was muted by the Plains Wars, labor strife, and economic downturn. Many Americans were not in a celebratory mood in 1976 for the Bicentennial, given the mood of the nation amidst the "great malaise" that came with the aftermath of Vietnam and Watergate. So in one sense, this is no different. People always find their own ways to celebrate their connections to the nation. In previous celebrations, despite the problems and despite perhaps restrained enthusiasm for the occasions, the country nonetheless found in them opportunities to reflect on American values and traditions. That is what we need to do now, I think. Find a way to use this moment to have a national conversation about values and the idea of America as a nation. We've gotten so comfortable screaming at each other online and fighting over real and imagined issues that we often fail to root our conversations in larger principles. One could argue that lamenting the current state of civic discourse as we prepare for the 250th perhaps misses the point: that such moments can make discussions of our past and conversation rooted in principle more impactful than if it occurred at a time of peace and prosperity. But that only happens if we commit to it and use it for that purpose. I think that means embracing the fact that we are divided, making that the premise of any conversations, and ceasing to present a divided nation for the 250th as a tragedy and instead see it as an opportunity.

MEVISSEN: This idea of the narrative is so critical for the historical profession. That's something we impress on our students: it is important how we tell the story. I teach students that if you were studying history 100 years ago, you would have just heard about the "great men" of history, people like the American presidents. The story would have focused on how they shaped this country. With the social changes taking place in the 1960s and 1970s, historians responded to these social movements by developing more inclusive narratives and looking at history of the people from below: not just how the factory owners, but how the workers contributed to American history; not just how presidents, but how everyday citizens participated in building this country. Historians also widened the scope to talk more about people of color and women as well. All this allowed us to create a fuller picture. And when it comes to commemoration, I think that it is really important that what we are trying to do is to weave a narrative in which all of those voices are heard.

I've had conversations with people who ask, why are we trying to erase our history? Or why are we trying to deny our history? I think I understand that they wonder why we are getting rid of

one particular narrative. How I see this process, however, is not that we are getting rid of one narrative, but we are adding to that narrative. And I think for some people, that feels threatening. It feels like, well, we can't just talk about all these bad things that happened. But in reality, by talking about the blemishes, as well as the positive aspects of our history, we can be prouder of that history. We know that we have overcome some dark times in our past, we have done things that we aren't always happy about. But that doesn't mean that we ignore those.

I think that because I have lived over in Europe and in Germany, one thing that I'm always struck by is the way that they talk about their own history. And part of that is that kids at a very young age are specifically taught about some of the tragedies that have taken place in German history, that they know these are the things that happen when we ignore or we forget about that history. They know what happened in their past and this allows them to understand the sort of gravity or the stakes that are at play when we forget that past. So, I think that that's something that's maybe useful to remember as well as we're commemorating 250, that we have these opportunities to reflect on lessons of the past rather than just ignoring them.

American values shape this conversation because we prize individualism, and it is very convenient to have a narrative that talks about the individuals who made history. But in reality, as an American society, we have this collective whole. And when we hear from everyone's perspective—good and bad—then we have a much better idea of what that history is.

WALSH: It was refreshing for me to hear Dr. Giltner and Dr. Mevissen remind us that we have celebrated our nation many times even in the midst of great turmoil, including the Civil Rights Movement and the Civil War. Yet returning to the goal of "forming a more perfect union" could be something that could unite us.

Historian Clay Jenkinson has argued that the 250th anniversary of America is an opportunity for "recommitment to the work." What do you see as "the work" we need to do as a nation, and how can people get involved in doing that work?

DEWAARD: I ended the last question with this theme in mind. There's plenty of "work" to be done. I don't want to sound like a slogan or bumper sticker. Apathy, complacency, and ignorance are incredibly destructive. I can certainly understand why so many people are turned off by politics and accordingly tune out. This is a problem, however. Disengagement facilitates poor and/or unaccountable leadership. One does not necessarily have to be involved formally with government or politics to influence them. Being an active member of the community—being civically engaged—contributes to a meaningful civil society. Informed and active citizens sustain healthy communities that undergird a peaceful and united nation. It's important we understand that citizenship comes with responsibilities—we rejected lesser status some time ago.

GILTNER: Benjamin Franklin's caution that we have a "Republic if you can keep it" is a good starting point. The work, as far as humanities scholars go, in the big picture is to defend and model both functioning civil society and a pluralistic social order that respects individual rights and dignity. For me, one of the key ingredients is to begin insisting that all discussions and debates be rooted in expressed principle, which is often lost in the back and forth. Perhaps the best way we can do that is to continue the conversations and redouble our efforts linking current debates and events to both our history and our civic values. Fostering opportunities to link events to rock bottom principles and encourage civil, respectful engagement is key. We all need to be informed and to encourage such open running dialogues. In fact, I would go so far as to say that it is incumbent on each one of us as humanities scholars and teachers to place this project near the top of our to-do lists and dive in wherever and however we can. Central to that project is the task of 1) constantly reminding our students, our audiences, and our readers that we explore the humanities not for their own sake but because they help us understand such larger issues as how to best protect and nurture human freedom; 2) modeling for our students that we do this to bring more people into the discussion by really talking to and listening to people across the political spectrum; and 3) reminding ourselves that our work exists for the larger social good and we should make sure our work is accessible and relevant beyond a narrow community of scholars.

MEVISSEN: I think what is so interesting about work is the connotation that it is work, that it's hard work. In recommitting to that, we have to remember that it takes a lot of work to sustain our democracy. And we need people to get involved. America feels like it has always had this sense of individualism as a point of pride. And yet, I think that for the work to get done, we need to be thinking about is collective action, what we need to be doing together. We have to be thinking of those other people besides ourselves, because the "perfecting of the union" occurs when we're all collectively working together towards that end. And I think about kind of high points in American history where there have been either protests or there have been maybe massive amounts of political pressure to improve conditions for Americans. I think that that's really how we've seen positive change taking place in this country.

I think sometimes people want to hope that it will all just get better or all be okay, but they don't see themselves as the ones that are actually going to *make* it okay. And I think that that's something that we can work towards: reminding either our students or reminding our communities that we're all in this together and figure out how can we keep working together to improve things for everyone.

WALSH: Right now, we have two very different visions of America: One part of America is committed to Liberty but doesn't seem to care much for Justice. The other obsesses about Justice but is not sufficiently committed to Liberty. Cultural warriors on both sides have often given up on democracy. They are prepared to gerrymander, lie, or otherwise undermine the votes of those with whom they disagree. A huge part of "the work" that we should commit to is the extension

of the democratic revolution. We should demonstrate the importance of the democratic process more than the victory of one side or the other in an election. This will require bold leaders who are willing to stand up to their own sides, when necessary.

What specific role do you see Culver-Stockton College, rural communities, or the Midwest more generally play in this larger picture?

DEWAARD: Institutions of higher education, like C-SC, play a vital role in generating a productive workforce and thoughtful electorate. They also promote informed and ethical decisionmakers. Altogether, higher education is critically important to supporting a healthy civil society that serves as a check on falsehoods and political-historical myth.

We live in a large and diverse country. The divide between urban and rural is real, but not insurmountable. In a pluralistic society, rural communities must find their voice to express their genuine and particular interests. To mobilize behind a common cause like rural education or health care (regardless of political party) can be a powerful message that state and national leaders dare not ignore. Rural communities are arguably the bedrock of the nation and play an invaluable role in our nation's economy and political landscape. That said, some Midwestern "neighborilyness" would be quite welcome in the current political discourse.

GILTNER: If we are to be successful in the big picture with revitalizing the humanities and ensuring they have a significant voice in America's public conversations over the next decade or more, we must work to convince the public that our larger goal is indeed civic and communal, rather than retreating into our own insular, esoteric academic discourse. In the public mind, the humanities have strayed too far from lived human experience and do not exist to serve the public good. One of the most obvious revelations of the past two decades has been the extent to which people in rural communities feel left behind by the economic and cultural changes taking place around them. In addition, the perception that colleges and universities are too removed from their rural, Midwestern communities and even working at cross purposes with them has contributed to the sense of estrangement between "town and gown." To a certain extent that is unfair, as institutions like Culver-Stockton, which was founded for the public good nearly 175 years ago, remain firmly focused on their role in and for the community. But public concern and doubt is undeniable and we must redouble our efforts to change public perceptions. For humanities scholars I think that means committing to initiatives that bridge the work of humanities with regional economic development, community planning, and related efforts. Programs like Tri-State Development at Culver-Stockton, which remind us that community development is a broad field that includes economics, politics, education, and culture, can give humanities scholars a platform to remind people of our larger "why" and to proclaim our own stake in developing our communities.

MEVISSEN: One thing that makes me really proud of Culver-Stockton College is that there are so many different avenues in which C-SC is attempting to address the needs of our rural communities and attempting to positively impact the institutions and communities that the college is embedded within. There are opportunities where we can work with local organizations or hospitals, we can help support them. I think that spotlighting those needs and helping drive the conversation on campus, as well as how we are filling that need, that's something that we're really proud of here on campus.

We also give students opportunities to then reach out to those areas as well, whether it's our student teachers that are helping in the local schools, our student interns that are helping with local organizations, our community action class that Dr. DeWaard teaches, students are actually participating in this. What we're finding is that we have resources here on campus that our community welcomes, that they need, that they are looking for. And I think that it's great that we have the intention to use our knowledge and our willing hands to go out and be part of those communities and help build up the things that we see as important parts of where we live.

WALSH: People in Midwestern, rural communities often feel left out. The institutions that have shaped our lives often seem to be abandoning us. Wealth and power seem to be flowing away from rural Midwestern towns and toward the coasts or the urban centers. With the closure of a local business, school, or hospital, our communities feel less secure. With the corporate buyout of a local bank or newspaper, our futures seem less in our own control. Culver-Stockton College can train leaders who can recognize the legitimate challenges without being fatalistic and without scapegoating others.

What do you see as the role or importance of the humanities in our contemporary society?

DEWAARD: Most important to me is the perspective and the intellectual scope of the humanities. The humanities remind us of the human capacity to learn, to improve societies, to overcome and to succeed. The humanities promote tolerance, respect, intellectual honesty, and human dignity. They also remind us of historical dangers and pitfalls to avoid. The humanities fortify a resilient civil society. They equip individuals to better serve as informed and active citizens.

GILTNER: The most important role that humanities scholars play in society today is that of advocate for not only the humanities in general but more broadly for the humanities as social good. The humanities are—or at least ideally should be—a site from which to remind fellow citizens of their obligations to each other as human beings and a place from which we can and must launch an effective counterattack against the growing tendency for people and human kindness and connection to be lost in a sea of ill-intentioned digital piffle. We should use our role as Humanists to keep conversations about values and lived experiences of real people at the

center of public discourse. We should weigh in more loudly and intentionally to public debates, especially where ignorance and fear is used to undercut reality. We should begin encouraging civil disagreement and debate as much as possible and not allow authentic discussions of American traditions and values to stop or be drowned out by partisan rancor.

But there is an important caution to be had here: none of this will happen without intention and effort. In my view, the tendency over the past few decades among humanists to downplay civics discussions needs to be reversed. To protect our values we need to share them, celebrate them, and make sure we teach them. We should be conversation starters and pot stirrers and protectors of the core notion that our work is external and community-focused, not insular or arcane.

MEVISSEN: I think that this is kind of the moment for the humanities, if I can speak boldly, because so much about the narrative for the past couple of years especially has been AI, technology, STEM. And I think what people are starting to realize, if you look at layoffs that are happening at tech companies, if you look at the impact that data centers are having on local communities' environments, I think that people are realizing that to have a completely technocratic approach, this faith that technology is going to improve everything is kind of missing the boat on the human critical thinking, ethical decision making element of this moment in our history.

One thing that I see as a critical component of the humanities is that it goes along with our mission of civic engagement and leadership. It is so important for students to learn about other cultures and other people, learn about the past, learn about the global community, understand how to contextualize things and think about important causal relationships, and think about ethics or philosophical underpinnings, religious differences and the ways in which maybe religions sometimes have a lot of commonality. Those types of discussions mold and sculpt a person, a student, a leader who can't help but go out and want to make positive changes when they're looking at the world around them. We want our students to grasp those fundamentals but more importantly, we want them to then go out and live those fundamentals. We want them to go out and lead the humanitarian-inspired life

WALSH: The biggest challenges facing our world, our nation, and our small rural communities are not technocratic. There is no magic solution. Rather, progress will require lots of small steps on a daily basis over a long period of time. It will require sober analysis, critical thinking, empathy, the ability to communicate across differences, and the willingness to question long-held assumptions. Culver-Stockton College has a long history of promoting these skills associated with the humanities and liberal arts education.

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