

The House Committee on Education and the Workforce Subcommittee on Early
Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education hearing on Curriculum

The School of Civic Life and Leadership (SCiLL) at the University of North
Carolina-Chapel Hill: Renewing our Nation's First Public University's Founding
Promise in an Age of Political Polarization

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Biography

Jed Atkins came to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in March 2024 to become the inaugural director and dean of the School of Civic Life and Leadership. Previously, he was at Duke University, where he had been a member of the faculty since 2009. There he was Director of Duke's Civil Discourse Project, which sponsored scholarly activities that promote engaged discourse with the goal of creating intellectually diverse communities, and also Faculty Director of the Transformative Ideas Program for sophomores, which includes an initiative on Civic Life and Thought. He also chaired the Classical Studies department and was an Associate Professor of Philosophy and Political Science.

Atkins is a scholar of Greek and Roman political and moral philosophy, the history of political thought, and contemporary debates on tolerance, civility and civil discourse. He is the author of *The Christian Origins of Tolerance* (Oxford University Press, 2024), *Roman Political Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), *Cicero on Politics and the Limits of Reason: The Republic and Laws* (Cambridge University Press 2013) and editor (with Thomas Bénatouïl) of the *Cambridge Companion to Cicero's Philosophy*.

I. Declining Trust in Higher Education and the Challenge to Our Civic Life

Dear Chairwoman Foxx, Ranking Member Scott, Chairman Bean, Ranking Member Bonamici, distinguished members of the committee, and my fellow citizens. Thank you for inviting me to speak to you on the School of Civic Life and Leadership (SCiLL) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. As the school's inaugural Director and Dean, I am working with faculty, staff, administrators, students, and other university stakeholders to develop a first-rate civic education designed to meet the challenges facing our democracy. To succeed in our undertaking, we must confront the sobering reality of political polarization and the rapid decline in public trust of our universities. Consider the following facts:

- America is polarizing faster than any other major democracy.¹
- Most republicans and democrats believe that members of their political outgroup are “immoral.”²
- This tremendous polarization is impacting how we address our country's problems at virtually every institutional level from our nation's capital to state capitols, from the corporate boardroom to the grade school classroom.
- Trust in almost all of America's institutions is at an all-time low.³
- The university is not exempt. The majority of Americans no longer believe that a four-year college degree is worth the cost (Chicago/NORC-WSJ); only 28 percent have “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in higher education according to a recent FIRE-Chicago NORC Poll. More Americans--30%--now have “very little” or “no” confidence in higher education than have a “great deal” of confidence--28%.⁴
- The current situation represents a precipitous decline in trust in our universities. According to a similar Chicago NORC/Gallup poll, 36% of Americans had “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in Spring 2023, 48% in 2018, and 57% in 2015.⁵
- Confidence in higher education is falling across all major subgroups when sorted by political affiliation, gender, and educational attainment. The greatest decline of confidence over the past year has occurred among women, democrats, and young people.⁶

The public has become increasingly aware of an irony: the university, an institution that should be best positioned to foster civil conversations about weighty matters of democratic import, has instead become a symbol for our democratic failures.

Given the current conditions, university leaders and stakeholders must explain to the American people why they should support the university with tax and tuition dollars. They must offer a

¹ Boxwell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro, “Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization,” <https://www.nber.org/papers/w26669>.

² See study here: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/08/09/republicans-and-democrats-increasingly-critical-of-people-in-the-opposing-party/>.

³ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/394283/confidence-institutions-down-average-new-low.aspx>.

⁴ <https://www.thefire.org/news/confidence-colleges-and-universities-hits-new-lows-fire-polls>.

⁵ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/508352/americans-confidence-higher-education-down-sharply.aspx>.

⁶ <https://www.thefire.org/news/confidence-colleges-and-universities-hits-new-lows-fire-polls>.

compelling case to young people about why they should spend four years of their lives in college, often incurring personal debt.

I believe a compelling case can be made. If I did not think so, I could not in good conscience lead a school at one of our top public universities. I believe that the university can and must be part of the solution to our democratic challenges. Here I will speak directly to those skeptics who hold our universities responsible for producing graduates who cannot work through disagreement or make wise decisions after considering different points of view. While this skepticism may well be warranted, there is a silver-lining: if universities have been part of the problem, then we can also be part of the solution. Indeed, we must be part of the solution.

To make a case for the university, I'm going to turn to the history of my own university, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. UNC was the first public university in the country, established by the North Carolina general assembly in 1789. The general assembly created UNC from the conviction that they had the duty to "promote the happiness of a rising generation" and "endeavor to fit them for an honorable discharge of the social duties of life, by paying the strictest attention to their education."⁷

The linking of happiness and duty comes from Trustee Samuel Eusebius McCorkle, who would later travel around the state trying to rally public support for UNC. On his speaking tour, McCorkle made a case for the value of a public education to a public who needed convincing.⁸ During my testimony today, I will examine McCorkle's case for a public university; then I will suggest how the mission, faculty, curricula, programming, and future directions of SCiLL renews the promise of Carolina's founding.

II. McCorkle's Justification for America's First Public University

Why attend a university? Is it because a university education will set you ahead financially, preparing you for a more highly paid job, which will start you on the path to enjoying a better, more satisfying career? Or is it because you will become a more thoughtful citizen, better prepared to live in our pluralistic democracy? Or perhaps universities are places to seek truth and produce knowledge, pursuits that benefit students and society by removing error and increasing our understanding of truth?

Today, these questions are fiercely debated by university leaders and scholars. McCorkle would say that this present-day debate is missing the point. He believed the new public university at Chapel Hill was valuable because it would aim at discovering truth and advancing knowledge—it should offer a liberal arts education; but he also believed it should offer a civic education that produces citizens who could flourish in a pluralistic democracy; finally, he argued the new public

⁷ <https://docsouth.unc.edu/unc/unc01-08/unc01-08.html>.

⁸ See <https://docsouth.unc.edu/unc/mccorkle/menu.html>. Citations to this document appear in parentheses in the text. Trustee McCorkle's vision was refracted through the prism of Scottish Enlightenment thought and his own Presbyterianism, but the tradition of a liberal arts education with civic and vocational dimensions finds its origins in the thought of Cicero, the Roman philosopher and statesman in whose writings the term "liberal arts" first appeared. See my presentation here: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?535619-2/human-nature-civic-education>.

university should provide a vocational education, setting graduates on the path to enjoy careers that would bring them happiness and increase the flourishing of society.

A. A Liberal Arts Education

Trustee McCorkle was convinced that above all the new university at Chapel Hill should provide a “liberal education” to give students “liberal knowledge” (53). By liberal education he meant an education in the liberal arts. Traditionally, the liberal arts were concerned with producing goods—those were the crafts or trades. A liberal education included those areas of knowledge that were good to know in and of themselves and which together offered the liberally educated person a picture of the whole—the natural world, the political community and society, the human person, and the cosmos. Hence, they encompass what today would be fields ranging from astronomy and geometry to literature and rhetoric to philosophy and political science.

How does possessing such knowledge make one a happier person and a better dispenser of one’s social duties? McCorkle’s answer was that the liberal arts benefit us because they replace error with knowledge.

Knowledge is good in and of itself. However, it is also personally and socially beneficial. Inasmuch as this knowledge gives us better insights into our place in the world, it helps us think institutionally and act within institutions. McCorkle made clear that we don’t need to go to university to get this liberal arts knowledge, but he argued a university, if done right, could help people more readily attain such knowledge.

How might a liberal arts education help us manage our own lives better and impact those around us for the benefit of all? McCorkle suggested a liberal arts education benefits institutional leadership. Given that “leadership” is in the name of the school I oversee, the connection between a liberal arts education and leadership is very important for me and my team.

The relationship between a liberal arts education and leadership was powerfully illustrated once to me and my students over lunch by Charlie Hill. Charlie was a distinguished diplomat and co-founder of Yale’s Grand Strategy Program. Leaders make decisions; they must make judgments and take responsibility for decisions that impact others. What knowledge and skills are needed? How are they to be acquired? Hill began by asking us a surprising question:

Do you know why generals are called generals? Generals are called generals because they are generalists. They have knowledge of the broader context in which to make decisions in a particular domain (in this case, the military). This general grasp of the domain allows them to weigh and balance the different knowledge, information, and sciences of the specialists; weigh the alternatives; and make a reasoned decision that best promotes the good of the institution. A leader within civic, social, and political contexts must have knowledge of the domain of civics. Where do you have the opportunity to acquire the generalist knowledge and capacities needed for leadership? Not in the workforce or in graduate or professional school, where you quickly specialize, but in your undergraduate education. Take advantage of this opportunity. Pursue a liberal arts education, not a pre-professional one.

One can imagine how such abilities to understand, listen, balance different perspectives, and then make a decision that will benefit the common good—what we may call the virtues of prudence or wisdom—will benefit our institutions, their members, and society. The leader as generalist applies not just to the military but to businesses, law firms, boards, and hospitals. We need citizens and leaders who can make sound judgments today more than ever.

B. A Civic Education

Second, Trustee McCorkle argued that UNC's education should be civic. It should shape future citizens. Civic education is sometimes thought to contradict a liberal arts education. A liberal arts education aims at the highest and universal things: Knowledge of the cosmos, the natural world, the human being, and the principles of good economics and government—knowledge of this type, it has been argued, has to do with things that are true at all times and in all places. My own alma mater's (Bowdoin College) offer of the college puts it this way: the liberal arts education the college provides will equip students, "To be at home in all lands and all ages."⁹

Such a view of a liberal arts education runs the risk that by being at home in all lands and all ages you might find yourself at home in no land and in no age. You might become a stranger to your neighbor and disconnected from your country, state, and local community.

McCorkle's view of education reduces this risk by supplementing a liberal arts education with a civic education. He recognized that a healthy republic required citizens committed to family, state, nation, and one another, and that "political charity" required an education that reflected the political and religious diversity of our state (28). Civic education requires knowledge, like a liberal arts education, but this knowledge encompasses place and time rather than the placeless and timeless. Civic education has to do with citizens. And citizens receive their identities from place, territory, their legal and social status, and their relationships to the history of their political community and its institutions. You can be a citizen of North Carolina, Ohio, the United States, England, France, Israel, or Japan. You cannot in the same sense be a citizen of the world: none of us have passports that read, "world citizen." Hence, civic education for Americans requires knowledge of American history and political institutions as well as state histories and state political institutions.

A recent survey by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni reveals that a majority of college students lack a basic understanding of American democratic institutions and our civic tradition, including such important facts as the author of the constitution, the term limits of the US House and Senate, the purpose of the 13th Amendment, the basic powers of the branches of our Federal government, and the names of key leaders in its executive, legislative, and judicial branches.¹⁰ The civic education offered by the university should provide students with knowledge of our democratic tradition and institutions that in turn will help them understand more deeply common civic bonds and shared challenges.

A civic education prepares you to learn to live with and learn to be charitable towards the people and places around you, even if they are different from you. This civic dimension continues to be a real strength of UNC today. We draw a very diverse student body from all 100 North Carolina

⁹ <https://www.bowdoin.edu/about/the-offer/>.

¹⁰ <https://www.goacta.org/resource/losing-americas-memory-2-0/>.

counties and beyond. The political, religious, and moral views of America are represented among the student body at Chapel Hill.

Crucially, Trustee McCorkle saw the liberal arts and civic dimensions of UNC as mutually reinforcing. The intellectual diversity of students and faculty helps support that truth-seeking aspect of a liberal arts education. After all, Trustee McCorkle argued, if one is going to discover the truth, one should admit professors and students from all different religious and political creeds to this enterprise. The foundational liberal arts dimension of a Carolina education itself demands freedom of thought and intellectual pluralism within a civic education.

On the other hand, the civic dimension of the university, which fosters charitable interactions with people who are different precisely because they inhabit a common place, space, and time supports the liberal arts enterprise and the freedom of thought that makes it possible. Trustee McCorkle summed up the relationship this way: “Behold the use of that *charity* which both gives and demands the liberty of thought!” (61)

C. A Vocational Education

Thirdly, and finally, Trustee McCorkle believed that a UNC education should be vocational.¹¹ He talked about the formation and education of doctors, ministers, teachers, and lawyers—the primary vocations of the day. But he didn’t believe this conflicted with a liberal arts and civic education. Indeed, he thought they went together.

Learning to judge well, to make good professional decisions, and to interact with charity towards folks from all backgrounds are wonderful attributes for the judges, doctors, teachers, ministers and others the 18th century University of North Carolina was aiming to produce (28, 39, 51). We have already seen how this skill is cultivated by a liberal arts education--remember the prudential leader as generalist--and civic education--remember the importance of charity towards those from different backgrounds.

But the vocational dimension of a college education enjoys an especially close link to happiness and to social duties, and hence takes us back to the legislation that established UNC-Chapel Hill as our nation’s first public university. Vocation comes from the Latin word, *vocare*, to call. A vocation we might say is a calling or a life’s work. A calling implies more than a job. It implies a sphere of work or study you undertake with purpose and intentionality. A calling has a sense of direction and of spirit: there is something ennobling or elevated about a vocation. Individuals pursuing a vocation or life’s work lift themselves above the mundane tasks that define their job and grasp an elevated sense of purpose that propels them forward, even and especially through rough times. They seek not just to earn a paycheck but to do meaningful work. Physicians aim to preserve the health of their patients; attorneys seek peace by resolving lawsuits; and teachers remove errors and promote knowledge (28).

¹¹ The term “vocational” is mine and reflects the broader liberal arts tradition which McCorkle is evoking when he speaks about the meaning, ethical concerns, and “duties” (or “offices”) of the different vocations for which UNC is to prepare its students. For the vocational dimension of the classical liberal arts tradition, see Arndt, “The Two Cultures and The Crisis in the Humanities,” <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1098521.pdf>.

Another way to distinguish between vocation and a job is as follows: your job is the answer to the question “what” do you do in your daily life to earn a wage or produce something good. A vocation demands that we also answer the questions “why” and “how”? “Why” do we do what we do for a living? “How” do we choose to conduct ourselves when we live that out? To what end? Preparing yourself for a vocation in college, then, does not just force you to answer the question, “What are you going to do with that major when you graduate?” It also requires that you answer, “Why is this job part of a good, meaningful life for me and for my community?”

People who embrace a vocation live a life of meaning and purpose. They have a sense of how their day-to-day life fits within the larger orbit of the institution and world in which they live. Students who have a high degree of purpose in their jobs report a much higher sense of well-being, 59%, than those who lack purpose, 6%.¹² Those with purpose in their lives and jobs are more resilient than those who lack purpose.¹³ They can navigate and seek good within complex institutions. These traits correlate strongly with individual happiness and with a flourishing society.

The connection between meaning and career remains a vital concern for our students and poses a challenge that universities are not adequately addressing. A Gallup/Bates College poll found that “95% of college graduates are looking for purpose in their careers. Only 40 percent said they had found a meaningful career. 34 percent indicated they were deeply interested in their work, and 26 percent reported that they liked what they were doing on a daily basis.”¹⁴ Addressing this “meaning gap” is a vital component of looking to the “happiness of a rising generation.”

III. Carolina’s Founding Promise and the Mission of SCiLL

SCiLL’s mission for civic education renews the promise of Carolina’s founders, who established UNC as our nation’s first public university on the premise that the young people of our state would benefit from an education that looked to their happiness and helped them understand their social duties in a pluralistic society. UNC-Chapel Hill’s founders understood that the search for human meaning was linked to living productive lives in a democracy. SCiLL promotes this vision by fostering a free-speech culture that enables students to explore their own world-views and those of others in a spirit of curiosity and charity by considering the best of what was thought and said about the perennial questions of human and civic flourishing; by coming to understand the shared institutions and civic values that unite us as citizens; and by practicing the habits of speaking, working, and living with folks from very different backgrounds.

A. Faculty

To provide a world-class civic education, you need a great team. I’m delighted to say that SCiLL has 19 faculty, including 11 hired since I came to UNC in March. We have been able to recruit faculty with PhDs from institutions like Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Chicago, and Oxford.¹⁵ We have

¹² <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/04/11/gallup-bates-report-shows-graduates-want-sense-purpose-careers>.

¹³ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hope-resilience/202103/the-impact-of-human-purpose-on-resiliency>.

¹⁴ <https://www.gallup.com/education/248222/gallup-bates-purposeful-work-2019.aspx#ite-248231>.

¹⁵ <https://civiclelife.unc.edu/2024/08/new-scill-faculty/>.

brought to Carolina national leaders in civil discourse and civic education. All faculty support the mission of SCiLL as outlined in the preceding paragraph.

Before the creation of SCiLL, there was no single department at UNC devoted to providing the sort of civic education I described earlier. As you know, if there is an important job but no one takes responsibility for it, then the work won't get done. SCiLL ensures that the serious work of educating citizens to live and thrive in our pluralistic democracy will get done. SCiLL faculty already hired, and those we hope to hire in the future, represent many disciplinary backgrounds, including political science, communications, literature, history, the history and philosophy of science, classical studies, religion, political economy, strategy and statecraft, and more. These disciplines enable scholarship and teaching to focus on the complex phenomenon of our civic life, which requires a multi-disciplinary approach. Much like other inherently interdisciplinary departments, such as Classical Studies, the department which I chaired at Duke, SCiLL will promote the work of scholars within the individual disciplines that make up our field and support our common departmental undertaking of the study of civics. This is in keeping with common practices in other interdisciplinary academic units. For instance, in Classical Studies, the faculty's work may intersect and be evaluated by scholars from within such fields as archaeology, anthropology, art history, philology, history, political science, religious studies, and literature. Despite their expertise in different fields, Classics faculty are united by a concern with overlapping questions, problems, and themes. The same will be true of SCiLL faculty, whose teaching and scholarship will focus on the multifaceted dimensions of civics and leadership.¹⁶

B. Classes and Curriculum

Students are already taking classes and enrolled in our minor. Some classes this semester help our students understand the intellectual underpinnings of the American political tradition so they can better grasp current challenges. Another course helps them learn to think and speak across difference. We will continue to expand our course offerings in the spring. Scheduled courses will help our students to think about the purpose of their college education, better understand the American democratic tradition, explore about the role of science in our public policy debates, and learn to talk in a spirit of friendship across our deepest divides, including difficult issues such as Israel and Palestine. Our minor includes courses in civil discourse that fulfill the Communication Beyond Carolina graduation requirement that all students must complete. Curricular and co-curricular opportunities will help students put into practice civil discourse and the wise decision-making of leaders within the context of their chosen careers or vocations.

We will be developing at least one major in the upcoming year. Our majors and minors will provide our students with the liberal arts, civic, and vocational education required to prepare them to be future citizens and leaders in a pluralistic democracy. We anticipate that our degree-holders will hold first majors and minors in the full range of disciplines that UNC offers training in and upon

¹⁶ In his book *What Universities Owe Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), Ron Daniels describes how, in the first part of the twentieth century, departments such as history and political science took on and then abandoned the responsibility of offering university students a civic education (p. 105).

graduation will go on to success in many different careers, from health care to business and from public service to education.

C. Co-curricular and Residential Programming

Most of the real world is outside of the classroom, and so SCiLL aims to set the table in numerous other venues for our campus community to explore important issues in a spirit of friendship. Our Program for Public Discourse brings vital panel discussions to campus and promotes formal and informal dialogue across difference through our Agora Fellows program.¹⁷ SCiLL Professor John Rose directs the Morehead-Cain Foundation's Dialogue and Discourse program, offering recipients of this prestigious scholarship opportunities to disagree better.¹⁸ Our student fellowship program will provide merit scholarships to our minors and will offer students special access to local, state, national, and international leaders and scholars as well as priority for internship placement and travel opportunities.

With the support of the office of student affairs, we will be offering programming on the freedom of expression and civil discourse to all incoming first-years as part of their orientation to the university. We are partnering with residential life to provide a civil discourse residential community, in which our students will be empowered to live, learn, and think productively across difference. Our Visiting Scholars Program will enable internationally renowned thinkers and leaders to join the Carolina community for periods ranging from three days to three months, or even longer. We will also be partnering with the School of Government to provide training in civil discourse for our first-year state legislators.

D. Longer-Term Aspirations: Study Abroad, K-12, and a Residential College

Longer term aspirations include a SCiLL in Washington, D.C. program, international study away options, and K-12 work focusing on equipping our state's high school students and teachers with the capacities for civil discourse and the knowledge of the American democratic and civic traditions. Providing high school teachers with effective pedagogy and curricula will help them prepare their students for the responsibilities of democratic citizenship in a pluralistic society. Among college students, developing the capacities for leadership, civil discourse, civic knowledge, and a sense of meaning in their careers is especially important for those who may become future schoolteachers. These qualities will help them succeed in their important and demanding jobs educating the next generation of citizens, who are the future of our democracy.

We aim to integrate our curricular, co-curricular, and residential programming in the form of a residential college for civic life and leadership within UNC-CH. This college will combine the strengths of a residential liberal arts college and a flagship research university.

IV. Carolina's Students and Our Democratic Future

¹⁷ <https://publicdiscourse.unc.edu/>.

¹⁸ <https://www.moreheadcain.org/blog/morehead-cain-foundation-appoints-john-rose-to-oversee-dialogue-and-discourse-program/>.

The greatest joy of doing this work is our students. We have some of the most dedicated and talented students in the country here at UNC-Chapel Hill. I have really enjoyed getting to know our SCiLL minors. They exhibit intellectual curiosity and display generosity of spirit towards those who see the world differently from themselves. I am inspired as I listen to stories of how our politically diverse students have sought to live courageously, thoughtfully, and charitably with others. SCiLL aims to educate generations of thoughtful citizens who can speak, live, and work in our pluralistic democracy. Imagine the impact of such a civic education after 40 years. I am convinced our students will change North Carolina, our country, and the world.