

**Report to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee and the Fiscal
Research Division
on the
School of Civic Life and Leadership**

The School of Civic Life and leadership at UNC Chapel Hill is a new school in the College of Arts and Sciences that will renew UNC's commitment to its founding promise:

“to consult 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.”

These words derive from Trustee Samuel Eusebius McCorkle's observation that “not more than a fifth part of the duties of society are enforced by civil laws.” The rest, he observed were duties of conscience and charity that require the “great and glorious object” of learning.¹

This report describes the progress made toward establishing the School of Civic Life and Leadership and factors affecting the long-term sustainability of the School.

The Vision and Purpose of the School:

The vision for the School of Civic Life and Leadership (SCiLL) is to create a dedicated faculty to prepare students for the study and practice of public discourse, civic engagement, and leadership rooted in the American political experience and democracy.

Political polarization in the United States has reached alarming levels in our society and at Carolina; it is by many metrics getting worse. According to the 2022 study Free Expression and Constructive Dialogue in the University of North Carolina System, “campuses do not consistently achieve an atmosphere that promotes free expression.”² While a majority of students across the political spectrum report a desire for constructive disagreement, there have been significant declines since 2019 in the number students who are willing to have members of their political outgroup as friends, enjoy them as classmates, and see them as important members of the campus community. These ideological forces further fray a campus culture in which many students struggle to find an intellectual community where

¹ <https://docsouth.unc.edu/unc/mccorkle/mccorkle.html>

² See Timothy J. Ryan, Andrew M. Engelhardt, Jennifer Larson, and Mark McNeilly, Free Expression and Constructive Dialogue, https://fecdsurveyreport.web.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/22160/2022/08/FECD_Report_8-21-22.pdf

they can experience belonging, trust, and the space for reflection required to build the capacities, virtues, and knowledge necessary for a life of leadership, service, and action.³

These troubling trends mirror those in our polity as a whole. Among both Democrats and Republicans, those with strongly unfavorable opinions of the other party have more than doubled since 1994, at approximately 45%. Today, clear majorities in both major political parties see members of the other party as immoral.⁴ The resulting costs have been steep. Recent studies have shown that the rate of polarization in America has grown faster than in all other major democracies world-wide.⁵ The increasingly polarized and relationally fraught office-cultures of major businesses, firms, and other institutions have impeded our collective capacity to solve our most urgent problems.

As America’s first state university, Carolina is well positioned to become the national leader among public universities in counteracting the forces of polarization, isolation, and distrust that impede the educational mission of our leading universities nationwide and hinder them from producing graduates who have developed the capacities and knowledge base to emerge as future leaders. Building out from the communications and democracy requirements in the College of Arts and Sciences general curriculum, SCiLL will provide the needed space to develop a culture of reflection and intellectual friendship sufficiently robust to combat the powerful forces of distrust, isolation, distraction, and narrow careerism. It will offer a range of courses in the general education curriculum as well as a course of study in its own curriculum. It will leverage the residential experience of UNC students to create opportunities for greater friendship through shared events, meals, and residential learning communities. By living and learning alongside their classmates, students will build the “rapport,” trust, and intellectual friendships necessary to have constructive disagreements in the classroom, thereby inspiring the “culture of listening, respect, and civil discussion for advancing democratic values and effectiveness in our campus community, North Carolina, and the world.”⁶

SCiLL will incorporate multiple elements in a strategy that reaches across UNC’s campus and beyond. The strategy incorporates four essential parts:

Public-facing: SCiLL will build on the success of the Program for Public Discourse (PPD) to showcase effective deliberation, reaching a broad audience and fostering meaningful conversations oftentimes across differences.

³ See Ryan, Engelhardt, Larson, and McNeilly, *Free Expression and Constructive Dialogue*, p. 48. These trends partly manifest themselves in the daunting mental health challenges for students at our leading public and private universities. The challenges began well before COVID and have greatly accelerated in recent years.

⁴ See study here: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/08/09/republicans-and-democrats-increasingly-critical-of-people-in-the-opposing-party/>

⁵ Boxwell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro, “Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization,” <https://www.nber.org/papers/w26669>

⁶ <https://democracy.unc.edu/>.

Campus-facing: SCiLL will enhance essential civic engagement skills for both faculty and students, offering shared living and learning experiences, including classes, meals, and workshops for improving oral presentation, debate, and mutual understanding.

Student-facing: SCiLL will integrate with the IDEAs in Action general education curriculum and build courses of study that offer students an interdisciplinary experience in civics, the humanities, and scientific literacy, all while promoting a culture of respectful disagreement and openness to changing one's mind.

Faculty and Visiting Scholar focus: SCiLL will develop a prominent Fellows program, featuring semester-long conversations on contentious topics. Scholars from various backgrounds will participate using a competitive leave model.

In all of these activities, SCiLL aspires to be:

-Uniquely Carolina: Leveraging the strengths and courses of Carolina in rhetoric, oral history, Southern and North Carolina studies, politics, philosophy, and community-based learning.

-Interwoven with the College: Establishing robust connections with units across the College of Arts and Sciences.

Progress in Selecting Inaugural Faculty:

To begin the work of SCiLL, Dean Jim White of the College of Arts and Sciences sent out a call for nominations in Fall of 2023. A SCiLL Faculty Interest Committee consisting of existing faculty Donna Gilleskie (Economics), Matt Kotzen (Philosophy), Doug MacKay (Public Policy), Avi Santo (Communication), Jeff Spinner-Halev (Political Science), and Sarah Treul Roberts (Political Science), received a total of 23 applications to serve as Initial Faculty members of SCiLL.

The Committee interviewed each of these candidates, assessing them for overall fit with the previously articulated goals and priorities of SCiLL, looking specifically at connections between SCiLL's mission and each candidate's research and teaching profiles, as well as to each candidate's administrative and other experience relevant to launching SCiLL. On October 6, the Dean announced the nine inaugural faculty of the School of Civic Life and Leadership. The nine initial faculty included Inger Brodey (English and Comparative Literature), Kurt Gray (Psychology and Neuroscience), Fabian Heitsch (Physics and Astronomy), Mark Katz (Music), Matt Kotzen (Philosophy), Christian Lundberg (Communication), Jason Roberts (Political Science), Sarah Treul Roberts (Political Science), and Molly Worthen (History).

The Dean assigned these faculty four critical tasks: 1) Define a vision for the new school, drawing on Carolina's strengths; 2) identify the search committee members who will lead the search for the permanent director and dean of SCiLL and begin that search; 3) initiate groundwork for developing the school's curriculum; and 4) build the administrative infrastructure that the academic unit will need to operate effectively.

The inaugural faculty, led by Interim Director and Dean Sarah Treul Roberts, developed an advertisement and profile for the permanent director and dean. The ad was posted in mid-October of 2023. The search concluded in March 2024 with the selection of Jed Akins to serve as the inaugural director and dean of the School of Civic Life and Leadership, as further detailed in the section **The Director and Dean of SCiLL** below.

Progress in Curriculum Development:

The inaugural faculty also set to work on curriculum by developing a minor in Civic Life and Leadership. In order to have a minor ready for the fall semester 2024, the minor was proposed to and approved by the Administrative Boards of the College at their February 6, 2024, meeting. The minor consists of five requirements: two core courses, two electives, and a required capstone course.

The first core class, called Foundations of Civic Life and Leadership, is an interdisciplinary offering that provides a foundation for understanding the origins of and the big questions surrounding American civic life and leadership. Part I of the course uses classical texts of politics, philosophy, and literature to examine the role of the state in society and the tensions that exist between individual freedom and the power of the state to keep order. Part II focuses on the American founding, including primary documents, in order to understand the unique elements of the American experiment in democracy. Part III applies the lessons of Parts I and II to a set of controversies and tensions in modern civic life.

The second core course, called Practice of Civic Life and Leadership, focuses on the ideas and practices necessary to analyze arguments and disagree in a productive and compassionate way, especially at a time of deep polarization in American culture. The course will focus on five debate topics over the course of the semester to practice researching multiple sides of an issue significant to civil society, engaging in oral and written argument, and developing criteria by which to evaluate argument, evidence, and debate performance.

In addition to the two required core classes, the minor requires students take two electives from three distinct categories of courses (the two electives must not be from the same category). These three categories are: Scientific Evidence and Engagement, Intellectual History and Humanities, and Civics and Political Institutions. Most of the available courses currently come from partnerships with other departments. The exception to this is SCiLL 200, Science and Society. This course explores the role of the sciences in a polity in general, and in American democracy specifically. The course introduces students to the

scientific method, its history and philosophical foundations, and its limitations. It explores the role of scientific evidence in societal and political decision making based on historic and current examples. The course emphasizes the practical skill of informing oneself about a scientific issue and exercising critical judgement regarding sources of scientific information. The role of scientific inquiry and expertise in a democracy is explored, focusing on the structure and goals of scientific institutions, funding bodies, and government agencies.

The final course in the minor is a capstone course. This course is still in development, but it will serve as a High-Impact Experience course that is centered around a 50-60 hour internship at a North Carolina civic institution, including (but not limited to) legislative bodies, courts, state agencies, K-12 schools, businesses with a focus on civic engagement, and nonprofit organizations. The goal of the course is for students to gain practical experience with the institutions that shape our civic lives. Each internship will be project-based; the general structure will be determined in advance in coordination with SCiLL leadership, and the specific internship goals and work product will be determined by the student in coordination with the on-site Internship Supervisor. In addition, students will participate in three in-person class sessions that are dedicated to discussing their experiences with their peers, thereby learning from their classmates' perspectives on different aspects of civic life. Students will also complete short writing assignments as they progress through their internships and develop their projects. At the end of the term, students will present and explain the results of their internship projects.

The Director and Dean of SCiLL:

A search committee appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences conducted a national search for a permanent leader for the school. On March 1, The Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina unanimously approved the recommendation of the search committee, Dean White, and Provost Clemens to appoint Dr. Jed Atkins as Director and Dean of the School, to be effective March 28, 2024.

As Director and Dean, Dr. Atkin's primary responsibility will be to provide academic, intellectual, and administrative leadership for the school. He will be responsible for advancing the academic mission and vision of the school. He will work to increase the strength and vitality of the school's educational and scholarly mission by promoting the recruitment and retention of creative and distinguished faculty, while developing resources to support teaching, research, and scholarly activities. As dean he will also be responsible for leading the recruitment and retention efforts to attract high-caliber undergraduate and graduate students and providing them with a superior academic and professional experience. Dr. Atkins will lead all administrative efforts, including development of the school's budget, academic policy development, curriculum development, facilities management, etc. and will enhance the financial stability and growth of the school by developing its economic resources and implementing effective

development activities. Additionally, he will endeavor to enhance engagement with local, state, national and international communities.

Dr. Atkins has a PhD in Classics and Master of Philosophy in Political Thought and Intellectual History from Cambridge University and Bachelor of Arts in Government and Classics from Bowdoin College. His interdisciplinary academic career and longstanding commitment to civil discourse and civic education make him ideally suited for the role of director and dean.

Dr. Atkins has held the E. Blake Byrne Associate Professor of Classical Studies and Associate Professor of Philosophy and Political Science at Duke University. He also served as Chair of the Classical Studies Department, Director of the Civil Discourse Project, and Director of the Transformative Ideas Program for sophomores, which includes an initiative on Civic Life and Thought. Dr. Atkins' research focuses on Greek, Roman, and early Christian moral and political thought. He has a special interest in Roman political philosophy and has published three books and numerous articles in that area. Beyond Roman political thought, Dr. Atkins has published on topics in Greek ethics and political thought, such as the concepts of *politeia*, moral conscience, and Stoic cosmopolitanism and natural law theory. Dr. Atkins regularly teaches undergraduate courses on Greek and Roman political thought.

Dr. Atkins is strongly aligned with the school's innovative approach to focusing on civic education with his own vision to make a deep and lasting impact by equipping students for lives of civic engagement and leadership. Dr. Atkins prior experience includes service as director of the Civil Discourse Project at Duke, which "sponsors courses, events, and scholarship that promote civil discourse through modeling or teaching the capacities and virtues necessary to engage in healthy exchange across difference." Dr. Atkins' leadership experience uniquely positions him to scale, support and institutionalize the efforts that were already underpinned by the Program for Public Discourse at UNC. Dr. Atkins' vision and ability to articulate a clear intellectual stance will affect every part of the school and will form the intellectual basis for how the school will recruit students and faculty and for external advocacy with campus leaders, stakeholders at the state level, donors, and adjacent schools at the university.

Dr. Atkins' experience as a department chair and program leader has prepared him well to serve as the school's primary administrator. He has experience leading staff and faculty and stewarding degree programs at both the graduate and undergraduate level. He has articulated a philosophy that the culture within academic units should invite contributions and maximize the potential of all faculty and staff. This is exactly the philosophy of leadership that will be needed to recruit and retain top talent to the school. Dr. Atkins is a candidate whose scholarly profile, leadership experience and commitment to SCiLL's mission and vision made him the most competitive candidate for this position.

Future Hiring and Factors Affecting the Sustainability of the School:

The School has opened two separate faculty searches, one for fixed term and the other for tenure track faculty. These searches will remain open until the legislative mandate to hire at least ten faculty from outside UNC is satisfied. These faculty will help build the curriculum and other programming to execute the strategy and vision we have laid out for SCiLL. This will require staff support, as well as infrastructure for the new school.

The initial funding for the school has come from a combination of nonrecurring funding appropriated in the 2023 Appropriations Act (N.C. Session Law 2023-134), anticipated matching university funds in the 2025 all-funds budget, as well as some private support. The breadth and scope of the school and the faculty hiring stipulated in the 2023 Appropriations Act will require a total annual investment of \$8 million.

	FY 2023-24	FY 2024-25	FY 2025-26	FY 2026-27
Faculty and Administration	\$ 1,400,000	\$ 3,550,000	\$ 4,500,000	\$ 5,500,000
Intern Scholarships	50,000	50,000	50,000	50,000
Program in Public Discourse	360,000	420,000	420,000	420,000
Faculty Fellows Program	–	1,080,000	1,080,000	1,080,000
Oral Communication Lab	–	1,078,000	1,078,000	1,078,000
Total	\$ 1,810,000	\$ 6,178,000	\$ 7,128,000	\$ 8,128,000

Recurring funding is needed as the school develops a major, general education courses, and public and campus facing programs that prepare our students with the skills needed to sustain and foster our democracy. Additional appropriation over the next three years would provide the funds needed to support the school in the long term.

The Promise of The School

We are tremendously excited by the potential that exists for SCiLL to be a national leader in fitting our students with the knowledge, conscience, charity, and skills to perform the duties of civic life that Samuel McCorkle felt were the object of this “new founded temple now rising up, and solemnly dedicated to learning, on Chappel-Hill.” We are grateful for the collaboration of the UNC Board of Trustees, the UNC System Office, and the North Carolina General Assembly as we undertake a project that is at the heart of UNC’s mission as the first public university.