



1819 NEWS

Allen Mendenhall: The hidden jewel at Jacksonville State

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Image via Jacksonville State University Facebook

For years I have argued that Alabama needs a new civics center or school housed at one of its public universities. Nearly two years ago I made the case [here in 1819 News](https://1819news.com/news/item/allen-mendenhall-the-case-for-classical-civic-learning-in-alabama) (<https://1819news.com/news/item/allen-mendenhall-the-case-for-classical-civic-learning-in-alabama>).

The country, meanwhile, has not been idle. By my count, 17 such centers have sprung up nationwide, and nine Republican-controlled state legislatures have passed laws requiring them. The pioneer, and arguably the best known, is Arizona State University's School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership. The most impressive, in my judgment, is the University of Florida's Hamilton School for Classical and Civic Education, although I have high hopes for the University of Texas at Austin's School of Civic Leadership as well.

The University of Alabama's own [School of Leadership and Policy](https://slp.ua.edu/) (<https://slp.ua.edu/>) is another matter. I have seen little evidence that it will resemble those 17 institutions. I remain open-minded, however, because hope is cheap and there's still time. Regardless, these civics centers, wherever they are, require stout defenders against ideological capture.

Meanwhile, a jewel sits largely unnoticed in Jacksonville, Ala. [The Center for Leadership and American Principles](https://www.jsu.edu/clap/) (<https://www.jsu.edu/clap/>) at Jacksonville State University describes itself as “dedicated to strengthening civic knowledge, advancing the study of civil rights, religion, and economic democracy, improving civic discourse, and preparing leaders who understand the foundations of American democracy.”

Such prospectuses are common; performance isn't.

Consider the Center's most interesting feature, a Master of Science in Education offered in partnership with the Jack Miller Center. It allows K-12 teachers to earn their degrees over the summer months at reduced tuition. It's a modest approach with large implications, because a teacher who learns the Republic's first principles will pass them to hundreds of students.

The Center's infancy makes its accomplishments more striking. A grant of more than \$2.6 million from the U.S. Department of Education came in late 2025, but the federal shutdown delayed the start of work. The first hire began this March; the second, in April. The Jacksonville State Board of Trustees approved the Center at its August meeting; the Alabama Commission on Higher Education followed in September.

According to Dr. Benjamin Gross, the Center's director, with whom I corresponded for this profile, the Center has already made an immense impact. Its summer programming demonstrates as much. “The Summer Civics Seminar hosted nearly 100 K-5 educators from across Alabama,” Gross said. “The Summer Civics Symposium had over 40 middle and high school teachers from Mobile and Dothan to Huntsville and Fort Payne.”

The reading list wasn't timid. "These teachers read and discussed primary sources such as the Declaration of Independence, U.S. Constitution, Bill of Rights, Federalist Papers, George Washington, Frederick Douglass, Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King Jr., and other sources that support the foundational principles of American government," Gross explained.

Faculty leaders, Gross told me, have visited the Center from the University of Florida's Hamilton School, Florida State's Institute for Governance & Civics, the University of Missouri's Kinder Institute, the University of Tennessee's Institute of American Civics, Utah Valley University's Center for Constitutional Studies, Arizona State's SCETL, the University of Toledo's Institute of American Constitutional Thought and Leadership, Hillsdale College, and others.

An institution this young rarely attracts such fine company.

The Center also hosts a civic discourse series, which enables the flourishing of campus viewpoint diversity, a phrase that too often describes an ideal rather than a practice. In January 2026, for example, the Center hosted a conversation on whether states may legally require the 10 Commandments in public schools. Gross says the Center is now seeking a broadcast station to carry TV-quality, ready-to-air programming for children and families across the state, and it hopes to broadcast material from its summer series as well.

Civic renewal seldom begins with a Big Bang. It begins, let's say, with a few dozen teachers, a summer, and a reading list that includes the Federalist Papers. Alabama has all three at Jacksonville State. That's plenty to celebrate, and a sign of grandness to come.

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