



# Old Main Chronicle

Division of Humanities, Religion, and Social Sciences

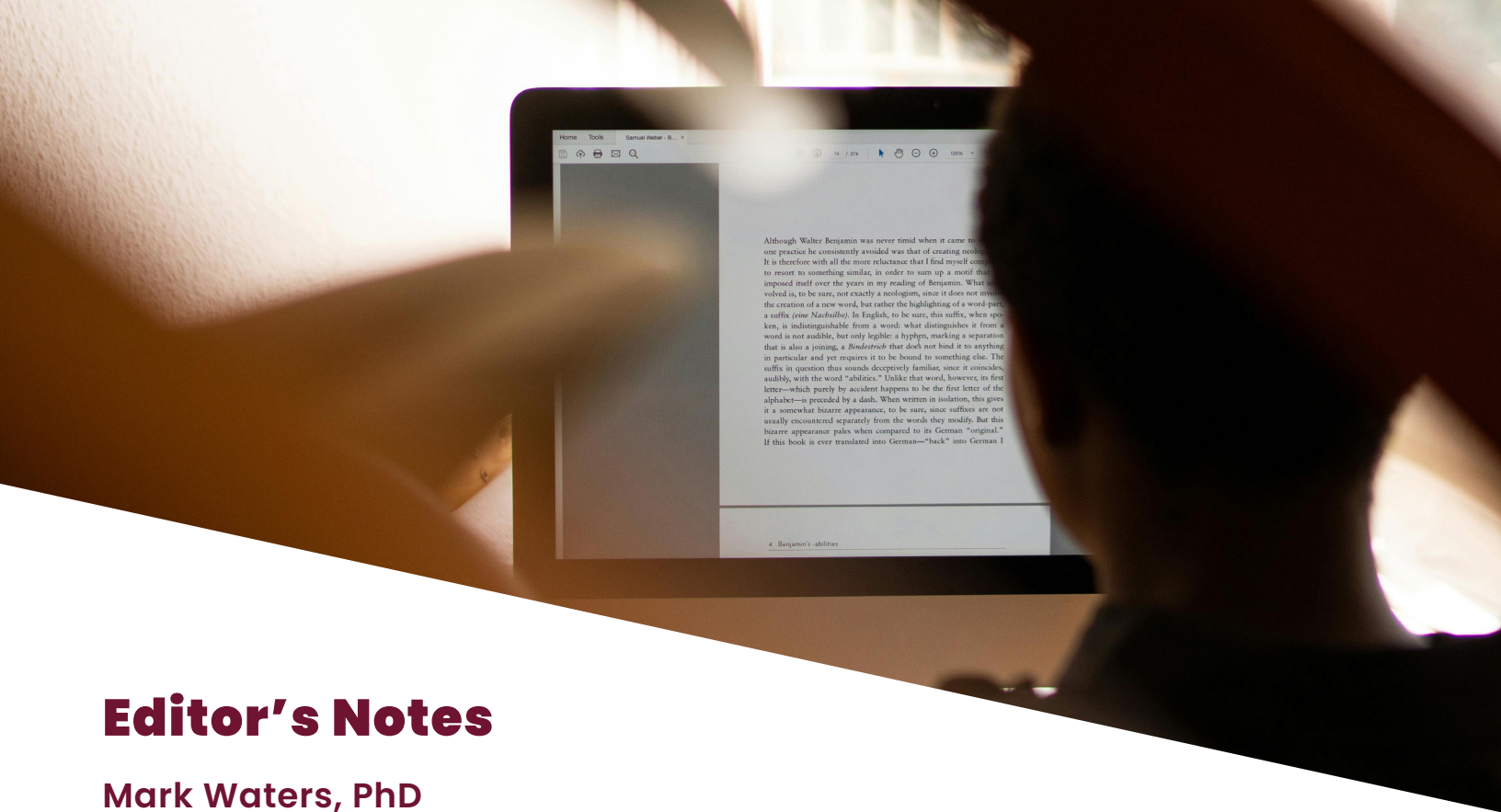
FALL 2025

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## Editor's Notes

**Mark Waters, PhD**  
**Professor of Religion**  
**Chair: Division of Humanities, Religion, and Social Sciences**

This issue of the Old Main Chronicle focuses on pressing social issues. The lead article by Religion professor Dr. Philip LeMasters addresses the issue of academic freedom. He notes the striking diversity among faculty members in McMurry's Department of Religion and Philosophy as a model of academic freedom. The phrase "unity in diversity" genuinely describes this department. Diversity of thought among faculty members contributes to holistic education for students. In this vein, he discusses some of the current political pressures that threaten diversity of thought and academic freedom. These pressures threaten the very nature of higher education.

Next, I contrast *religion and politics with church and state*. My claim is that Christians can strongly support the separation of church and state while, simultaneously, publicly addressing political issues. Religion and politics can mix when monitored by careful critical thinking and characterized by humility.

Continuing with a political theme, student Jax Melbourne co-authored the third article with McMurry Political Science Professor Dr. Paul Fabrizio. They tell the story of noted political scientist V.O. Key. Key began his academic career at what was then McMurry College and later earned a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. Key's teaching career included appointments at

UCLA, Johns Hopkins University, Yale University, and Harvard University. Fabrizio and Melbourne cite later scholars like Merle Black who continued Key's scholarly trajectory. They write, "What is consistent with both Key's and the Black's work is the ruthlessness of Southern politicians. They aim to win. They do not fight nicely." Fabrizio and Melbourne conclude by connecting these historic issues to our current political environment.

Communication instructor Joel Whittemore transitions from politics to another pressing social issue, artificial intelligence. He provides helpful insights about AI as a teaching tool and compares and contrasts Claude.ai with ChatGPT. AI is here to stay. We need to learn its dangers and embrace its positive potential.

Director of Servant Leadership Jeff Scott concludes this edition with an update on McMurry's innovative Professional Leadership Program. Scott explains, "In alignment with the Division of Humanities, Religion, and Social Sciences, the PLP offers students across all majors an opportunity to develop the soft skills most admired in leaders – effective communication, ethical judgment, critical thinking, teamwork, and cultural competence – through structured experiences that connect learning to real-world impact."

# Academic Freedom and Liberal Education: Thirty Years in the Religion Department

Philip LeMasters, PhD  
Professor of Religion  
Director of the Honors Program



One of the best aspects of my thirty years at McMurry has been the combination of academic freedom and collegial spirit of the Department of Religion and Philosophy. Across three decades, I have been privileged to work with fellow scholars and teachers in a context of mutual respect, a shared commitment

to the academic study of religion, and friendship. The names and faces of colleagues have changed over the years, but the freedom to think, teach, believe, speak, and write as we each see fit has remained constant.

An earlier version of McMurry's mission statement affirmed that "Our pursuit of academic excellence is supported by our belief that truth, in a universe created by God, is nothing to fear." The members of the Religion Department currently include a United Methodist, an Episcopalian, an Anglican, and an Eastern Orthodox. We studied in different institutions, have different academic specialties, and do not agree on all matters of Christian belief and practice. That we are not intellectual or spiritual clones benefits our students, for they become liberally educated people by encountering a variety of perspectives and learning to assess them fairly. My colleagues and I model a critical appreciation of intellectual diversity and focus primarily on the many points of agreement that enable us to serve our common mission. The strength of our approach is evident in the success of many of our graduates who have earned master's degrees at prestigious theological seminaries and divinity schools throughout the US, often on full-tuition scholarships. They report marveling at how well prepared they are for graduate work in such lofty contexts.

One hears today of public universities in Texas in which faculty members have been dismissed for expressing views contrary to the reigning political orthodoxy. Some words must be scrubbed from grant applications and institutional websites in our nation due to fear of negative consequences. An increasing number of books are being banned from libraries and schools. Some applaud

these developments as a needed reaction to other types of political correctness in prominent universities.

Regardless of any political dynamic or cultural agenda, however, such restraints on academic freedom are antithetical to liberal education, for they prevent professors from exposing students to the full panoply of ideas relevant to the rigorous evaluation of truth claims. The use of the term "liberal" in this context has nothing to do with political partisanship and everything to do with acquiring freedom from ignorance and prejudice. Liberal education enables people to cultivate the habits of mind that enable them to pursue virtuous lives of service to their neighbors and communities. Students are not passive sponges but active agents when they learn to see themselves, their neighbors, and the world more clearly through their studies. It is insulting to protect students from challenging, controversial, or even offensive ideas as though they lacked the wherewithal to engage them rigorously. It is counterproductive to the formation of free, mature persons to deny students the opportunity to develop the habits of critical thinking necessary to respond fairly to concepts that make them, or anyone else, uncomfortable.

Perhaps the current cultural climate in our nation and state provides an opportunity for McMurry intentionally to cultivate an even stronger commitment to the free exchange of ideas in classrooms, student organizations, and other areas of campus life. There are surely many faculty and students today who want to teach and learn in an environment free from censorship of whatever ideological stripe. Since "truth, in a universe created by God, is nothing to fear," there should be no constraints on what we think, say, or write as we pursue truth together in a university committed to liberal education. It is my hope that the freedom of thought and collegiality characteristic of the Department of Religion will continue to flourish on this campus. Indeed, it must continue to thrive for our university to remain true to its highest ideals and for us to form our students well.







# Religion and Politics vs. Church and State

**Mark Waters, PhD**

**Professor of Religion**

**Chair: Division of Humanities, Religion, and Social Sciences**

I am an avid supporter of the First Amendment including the separation of church and state. "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...." A state sponsored church would be an example of "an establishment of religion" as would the implementation of theocratic governmental policies. These examples also constitute "preventing the free exercise thereof." A teacher leading prayer in a public school classroom impinges on the "free exercise" of students whose faith or family's faith differs from that of the teacher. Teachers are free to pray all they want outside of that role.

Church and state should be separated by Thomas Jefferson's metaphorical wall. In 1802, Jefferson reassured the people of the Danbury Baptist Association of Connecticut in a letter saying, "I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between Church & State."

Nonetheless, the separation of church and state is not necessarily the same as the separation of religion and politics. I get annoyed when people, including the late Harvard Philosopher John Rawls, conflate separation of church and state with the separation of religion and politics or with the

privatization of faith. The lack of critical thinking, especially by an otherwise brilliant philosopher, is mind-blowing! Rawls claimed that religion is a purely private matter.

The Greek word polis means city or community. It intersects public life implied in a broad sense by Greek understandings of city and community. After all, their polis was the city-state—the organization of public life. Polis reflects the communal nature of human interaction and policy. Religion, like politics, is inherently communal. Indeed, one way to distinguish between religion and spirituality is that spirituality can be private whereas religion involves communal interaction.

I teach religions of the world in addition to theology. I cannot think of any religion, including my own Christianity, that does not involve interaction with, and ethical influence upon, public life. "Learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:17). "Do what is just and right...Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner" (Jeremiah 22:3). "Love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44). "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me...Truly I tell you, just as

you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me" (Matthew 25: 34-40).

These verses and others belie the myth that religion should remain a private matter. Christian ethics are political as are the core ethical standards of most if not all faith traditions. Religious people attempting to influence the government with their ethical convictions does not, in and of itself, trespass the establishment clause. I recognize that religious influence is unfathomably messy in light of the fact that people in the same religion (as well across religious differences) have very different opinions about what is ethical or moral. But that is a different issue outside the scope of this article.

Of course, zealous folks may inappropriately, even illegally, cross the church-state line by misusing instruments of government such as electoral manipulation or by working within explicitly governmental processes to prop-up one's own religion while limiting the free exercise of someone else's. But the extremes of zeal do not invalidate the legitimacy of religious influence in the public square. Any religion worth its salt is more than a private matter. To put it succinctly, I'm arguing that one can mix religion and politics while carefully honoring the separation of church and state.

Why is this argument relevant this newsletter? In addition to the fact that religion and political science are in this academic division, I'll identify two reasons; both of which are related to critical thinking. First, parsing-out religion and politics versus church and state is, itself, an exercise in critical thinking, a skill tied directly to Humanities, Religion, and Social Sciences. Failure to think critically about these things has real life consequences. These consequences span extremes from attempts to create a theocracy in the name of "freedom of [my] religion," to the false belief that faithful folks have no right to impact public policy based on their faith convictions. In other words, unlike mixing church and state, there is nothing inherently wrong with mixing religion and politics. Problems arise when we don't think critically about how we mix these two social phenomena. (I recognize, of course, that some people do think critically, understand everything I've claimed, and simply don't care about the consequences.)

Second, critical thinking about these matters discloses that, in some cases, mixing religion and politics yields pathological "certainty." Positions in both realms can become exceedingly rigid and exclusive. Every tyrant is certain about the reasons their will should be enacted or forced. Time after time, mixing religion or politics with illusions of certainty is damaging to individuals and society.

Referring to Auschwitz, Scientist and Philosopher Jacob Bronowski wrote, "When people believe that they have absolute knowledge (certainty)... this is how they behave. This is what [people] do when they aspire to the knowledge of gods."\* The problem is not mixing religion and politics per se. It is inevitably problematic, however, to do so with arrogant certainty.

I've saved the following quote for over thirty years to remind myself of the dangers of certainty. The words also remind me not to fret when lacking certainty. Dr. Browning Ware (1928-2002), the author of the quote, was the pastor of First Baptist Church in Austin, Texas from 1973-1996. He penned these words sometime in the late 80's or early 90's.

"When younger, I thought there was an answer to every problem. And for a time, I knew many of the answers. I knew about parenting until I had children. I knew about divorce until I got one. I knew about suicide until three of my closest friends took their lives in the same year. I knew about the death of a child until my child died. I'm not as impressed with answers as once I was. Answers seem so pallid, sucked dry of blood and void of life. Knowing answers seduces us into making pronouncements. I still have a few friends or acquaintances who are 100 percent sure on most anything, and are ready to make pronouncements on homosexuality, AIDS, marriage problems, teen-age pregnancies, abortion, sex education or whatever is coming down the pike. But when we get shoved into our valley of the shadow, a pronouncement is the last thing we need. A friend wrote recently, 'I, too, get Maalox\*\* moments from all who know. I'm discovering that wisdom and adversity replace cocksure ignorance with thoughtful uncertainty.' More important and satisfying than answers is the Answer. "Thou art with me" – that's what we crave. There may or may not be answers, but the Eternal One would like very much to be our companion."

My use of this quote is not a suggestion that we give up on finding answers or solving problems. I am asserting that prideful certainty—which easily collapses into cocksure ignorance—weaponizes both politics and religion in ways that damage individuals, institutions, and societies. We would do well to exercise humility and careful critical thinking in every aspect of life, particularly in all things political and religious.

\*Jacob Bronowski, *The Ascent of Man*. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 353.

\*\*A "Maalox moment" represented the indigestion (actual or metaphorical) one might get from something distasteful. It was a Maalox television ad campaign that caught on in popular language.



# V.O. Key and Me

## Paul Fabrizio, Ph.D. and Jax Melbourne '27 Professor of Political Science and Student



In September 1924, a thin boy of 16 joined the ranks of new students at McMurry College, meeting for the first time in the Old Main Auditorium. The boy, known for his initials, V.O. (Valdimer Orlando) Key, was born in Austin but a resident of Lamesa. His father, also Valdimer Orlando Key, a lawyer, sent him to McMurry for his last year of high school and his first two years of college. V.O. Jr. was involved in academic and social life on campus, even becoming the editor of the student newspaper.

V.O.'s time at McMurry was brief. He went on to UT Austin and earned his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago in 1934. His dissertation was entitled "The Techniques of Political Graft in the United States."

He taught at a variety of schools including UCLA, Johns Hopkins, and Yale before ending his career at Harvard. He died in 1963, while serving on their faculty.

Key, who became president of the American Political Science Association, was one of the most influential political scientists in the 20th century. He was an expert on elections, interest group behavior, and public opinion. He championed regional political studies, voter behavior, and quantitative research methods.

Professor Key wrote several important works in political science. His book, *Public Opinion and American Democracy*, written in 1961, helped to provide a framework to understand how public opinion influences government policy. Key wrote, "If a democracy tends toward indecision, decay, and

disaster, the responsibility rests [with its political leaders], not in the mass of the people" (p. 558).

He also provided a word of caution in studying public opinion in that same book. On page 7 he wrote "To speak with precision of public opinion is a task not unlike coming to grips with the Holy Ghost."

To students of voting behavior, Key's admonition was best not forgotten. "Voters are not fools," he said frequently.

Key's most famous and most influential work was a true soak and poke into Southern Politics. His book, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (1949), was a true travelogue into the South. He and a colleague, Alexander Heard, immersed themselves in Southern political life, visiting all eleven states of the former Confederacy, interviewing Southern voters and politicians. They wrote up a state-by-state investigation of its politics, and then Key provided an in-depth analysis of trends across the region. The conclusion was that politics in the South revolves around the race issue and that the losers are the those at the social and economic bottom of both Black and White races. He found that wealthy Southerners manipulated working class white voters to preserve the existing social and economic order.

Key's work documented the racial underpinning of Southern campaign rhetoric. He described campaign techniques that were cruel and efforts by wealthy politicians to limit suffrage to a chosen few. He wrote of the work of politicians like Huey Long in Louisiana, Edward Hall Crump of Tennessee, and Herman Talmage of Georgia, who all used social and cultural differences to build winning political coalitions that benefited the existing power structure. The one-party control of the Democrats only added to the existing political pattern as Democratic nominees won at the party primary election, often in the Spring before most voters were paying attention. The only real competition in elections was in those party primaries. Key's story of Southern Politics was not a hopeful one. At times, it was ugly.

About twenty years after Key's death, his work on the South was continued by identical twin brothers with Ph.D.s in political science, Merle and Earle Black. Both scholars, raised in East Texas, chose to carry Key's work into a more modern age. For thirty years, they were the chroniclers of Southern Politics. Earle

at Rice University and Merle at Emory University collaborated on four books that placed more recent Southern politics into a national footing.

The Black brothers described a South that transitioned from a racially divided region into a region where race was important, but where candidates tried to be post-racial. Economics and class underpinned politics, certainly, but culture was just as important. The South gradually morphed into a two-party region but then moved into a one-party place again, this time Republican.

The Blacks examined more modern politicians like Strom Thurmond of South Carolina and Newt Gingrich of Georgia. Thurmond started his career in the black v. white era of politics but moved to be friendly with everyone as black voters participated more in the political process. Gingrich came of age in a time in Atlanta politics where the city's unofficial motto was "The City that is too Busy to Hate" and rose as a Republican to become Speaker of the US House of Representatives.

What is consistent with both Key's and the Black's work is the ruthlessness of Southern politicians. They aim to win. They do not fight nicely. They use all the weapons at hand, whether they be populist calls for lower grocery prices, or cultural differences between us and them to get voters, often poorly educated voters, on their side.

In their book *Divided America: The Ferocious Power Struggle in American Politics* (2007) they describe how Southern political campaigns and ideas are creeping into other parts of the US. The regional nastiness of Southern politics has now become part and parcel of election politics across the country.

I (Paul Fabrizio) was a student of Merle Black at Emory University in the early 1990s. He was my mentor as I wrote my dissertation on presidential nomination contests. I provided some research assistance in one of his books and he taught me about his passion, the South. As a Californian, I did not understand the meanness of how campaigns are conducted out here. I grew up in Southern California, where politicians like Richard Nixon had their own kind of nastiness, but Southern politics adds race and culture to the mix. Dr. Black was my guide to all of it.

I have often wondered if the V.O. Key book, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* was still relevant today as it was in 1949. So, when Jax Melbourne, a junior student from Tuscola, approached me about an honor's contract with my Congress course, I thought it might be time to take another look at that original work. Here are Jax's thoughts about that book and today's politics.

According to V.O. Key, several elements are unique

to the South in the post-Civil War through World War II era: unity under one political party, but chaos within that party, and the struggle between the white, wealthy plantation classes, poor White people, and poor Black people. The display of interparty conflict explains the sectionalism that develops between the wealthy conservatives and the poor who veer toward radicalism and populism in the 80 years between 1865 and 1945. This dynamic can be seen today in many ways, most notably the divide between the "establishment" wing and the "MAGA" wing of the Republican Party.

Southern politics have tended to be dirty, gritty, mean, and ruthless; many of these elements have crept into national politics. President Donald Trump seems to resemble the trend of southern-style politicians who use the force of their personalities to gain voter support. Key wrote, "[the] South must depend for political leadership, not on political parties, but on lone-wolf operators, on fortuitous groupings of individuals usually of a transient nature and on spectacular demagogues odd enough to command the attention of considerable number of voters" (p. 16). In many ways, President Trump seems to encapsulate this observation.

Like Governor Huey Long of Louisiana (1928-1932) did, President Trump attacks the media. Trump heavily relies on claiming to be the victim of a corrupt system; Senator Theodore Bilbo (1935-1947) claimed the Mississippi government had a vendetta against him, catapulting him to power. Like Memphis, Tennessee Mayor Edward Hall Crump (1910-1915), President Trump uses his power to control his party, threatening to take away the support of his base from interparty dissidents. Like Governor Herman Talmadge (1947-1955), who used the urban part of Georgia to enrage and unite the agrarian sectors, Donald Trump uses the "woke" and the "elites" to unite his MAGA base. In short, Donald Trump uses the tactics and means used by generations of Southern politicians to aid in his success.

A final central theme in Key's work raises questions about the success of the Trump presidency. Key argues that general frustration and desperation among voters regarding traditional political establishments leads them to politicians described above but those politicians fail to provide effective governance. Key articulates this point in writing that the "have-nots lose in a disorganized politics. They have no mechanism through which to act, and their wishes find expression in fitful rebellions led by transient demagogues who gain their confidence but often have neither the technical competence nor the necessary stable base of political power to effectuate a program (p.307)." Is the Trump presidency going to be able to fulfill the demands of his voters?





## Mucking About with AI: Claude.ai vs. ChatGPT\*

Joel Whittemore  
Instructor of Communications

I've been mucking about with AI.

Not in the sense of the playful attempts we might have tried when OpenAI was first introduced a few years ago, you know, like creating prompts such as, "Write by a brief SciFi story about a gunfight in the style of Shakespear." My mucking about this year was prompted by two events. The first was an article published in Adam's Legal Newsletter on June 8, 2024 by Adam Unikowski. In his article titled In AI We Trust, Unikowski advocates for the idea that some AIs might be better at deciding legal cases than human judges. Noting that AIs have not yet been trained on the corpus of legal literature, Unikowski claims that some AIs, specifically Claude.ai in this case, are already better at deciding easy legal cases yet struggle with the more difficult cases, just as human judges do. Unikowski observes that future iterations of AI are likely to improve in this area as their training database expands. The big advantage of using AI in deciding these cases is the speed at which they reach correct results. The second event prompting my mucking curiosity was the faculty colloquium at the start of the academic year; it was interesting to see some of the ways that colleagues have been putting AI to use. And so, I've decided to adopt a permissive attitude toward students' use of AI this semester, rather than taking a punitive stance similar to that of treating AI use as a form of plagiarism.

The first step in adopting the permissive stance was to produce a Guidelines for Use of Artificial Intelligence document, which resulted in a single-page policy statement detailing acceptable practices. The main principles of acceptable use focus on footnoting use of AI in every instance, verifying accuracy of results, checking for logical consistency, being cognizant of ethical concerns related to intellectual property,

privacy, and/or misuse, and finally, to remember human agency by never surrendering authorship of their work to the AI. (Note: most of these guidelines arose from breakout discussions during the faculty colloquium.) The primary goal of the guidelines is to prompt students to think about how they are using AI purposefully, hence the focus on footnoting AI use rather than citing AI usage. I'm hopeful that we can get students to view AI as a tool rather than as a source. I don't know much about AI, but I suspect a few things to be true; 1) AI is not going away, 2) AI is going to improve, and 3) just as we once listed proficiency in tools such as Microsoft Office or Adobe Creative Cloud on our resumes, students will soon be listing proficiency in Anthropic's Claude.AI, or DALL-E, or DataRobot on theirs.

Where has my mucking taken me? Primarily in two directions. The first was in using AI as a tool for teaching students to produce a piece of rhetorical criticism by understanding the process of writing term papers. Part one of the project requires the students to select an artifact for analysis and then describing the historical, cultural, and social context surrounding the artifact; it also involves selecting a method for performing an analysis on the artifact. AI has a lot to offer in these areas. The difficulty has been in bringing the students to a point of presenting the AI with effective prompts that will produce useful material. This has been one of the early challenges. My own journey has taken the form of asking the AI to produce a lecture on a topic that includes not only foundational and core concepts but also produces a list of seminal works that inform the research effort. This has helped to shape the research effort by producing key words for further research as well as guiding students to resources.

This has been an area where students struggle to find a starting point. The AI has also been helpful in shaping the historical, cultural, and social context surrounding the artifact by engaging in an iterative Q&A rather than presenting a one-time singular prompt such as “write this for me.” In some instances, this has helped students to understand the research steps necessary in performing the type of criticism we are after. To date, this is as far as we have made it on the project so I’m unable to address the next steps of the project, which will be to perform the analysis/interpretation of the artifact followed by the final evaluation/conclusion. My greatest fear is that the analysis/interpretation section will present a rather large enticement for students to surrender their agency/authorship. We’ll work on it.

The other area in my mucking journey doesn’t involve students directly but rather looks to the use of AI for assessment purposes. In this endeavor I took the assignment prompt for the project described above, coupled it with the AAC&U Critical Thinking rubric, coupled those with instructions to the AI on how to report its results, and further coupled these with a student’s paper from a year ago all into a single document. That document was submitted to OpenAI’s ChatGPT for analysis. The result, I’m sad to say, is that I think I could literally hear ChatGPT screaming, “Get Off, GET OFF!” Unfortunately, the document, about 18 pages in all, was too much for ChatGPT to handle. And so, I turned to Anthropic’s Claude.ai, which Adam Unikowski indicated could handle large document sets. If it could handle multiple legal briefs, surely it could handle my request. I’m pleased to report that the results are promising. The scores returned by Claude.ai centered on a normative score of 2 (Proficient), which is the minimum where we would like our students to be performing. Only occasionally did Claude.ai mark an item as 3 (Accomplished), and no scores of 4 (Advanced) were returned. Additionally, there were no 1s (Basic) or 0s (Below Basic) presented in the results, which was personally comforting. In addition to the quantitative scoring, Claude.ai produced qualitative results based on the language of the assignment prompt and the language of the scoring rubric by discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the students’ performance as related to the topical categories in each. In all, I’ve submitted three samples and Claude.ai was able to score the quality of the papers accurately relative to one another. Unfortunately, I believe that Claude.ai scored all the samples lower than the department did when completing the actual assessment; this will be the next thing to check on. This concern might be handled by either revisiting the prompt submitted to Claude.ai by clarifying the instructions on how to produce its results or revising the rubric slightly. I’m still in the early stages of this project.

In all, I think I’m becoming a fan of AI, or perhaps specifically of Claude.ai, to the tune of buying into an annual subscription. As hinted above, I’ve asked Claude.ai to produce some lectures for me over the past couple of days in the areas of ideographic criticism, framing analysis, and close reading; all of which deal with the broader theme of hegemony in rhetoric studies. The result Claude.ai returned has created a sense of *déjà vu*, of being back in grad school. The seminal texts listed as foundational theoretical works, key readings, or exemplary studies are not only accurate but are texts I recognize as assigned textbooks, listed on required reading lists, or indeed are standing on my personal bookshelves. In no instance has Claude.ai produced anything I might consider to be a hallucination or to be false, yet. It is interesting to note here that when asked, Claude.ai claims that it is unable to cite sources and is relying instead on its memory of the training materials; this despite being able to reference relevant documents as part of the results.

This leads me to a final thought, and that simply is the obvious idea that not all AIs are created equal. AIs have been around for decades and indeed have been used heavily for data analysis, market research, and perhaps political campaigning; in these areas they seem to be trusted assets, if perhaps with caveats. To my mind, the problematic concern with the new generation of AIs is their generative use where AIs are unimaginatively asked to “write a paper.” Such a prompt allows the AI to exercise its own creative imagination that is often producing the hallucinations, or making ‘stuff’ up, that seems to be its weakness. But, when presented with a limited data set coupled with a directed task that is grounded contextually and includes instructions that direct the reported results, some AIs seem to be able to perform well. I will note this. I took the prompt I presented to Claude.ai for developing the lecture on framing analysis and submitted it to ChatGPT. The results are not comparable. Whereas Claude.ai produced triple the volume of material in an organized, detailed, accurate, and immediately usable format, ChatGPT barely hit some highlights that bordered on incomprehensible and certainly not very usable. Claude.ai’s results also prompted iterative follow-on questions whereas ChatGPT, in this instance, produced in me only a sense of, “you’ve got to be kidding.” Unfortunately, ChatGPT may be far too popular for the moment; I hope this changes.

This is my story, for now, and so I’ll continue mucking about.

\*In keeping with the spirit of my Guidelines for Use of Artificial Intelligence, I offer the following disclaimer: no AI was used in the production of this article.



# The Professional Leadership Program: Advancing Our Servant Leadership Reputation

**Jeff Scott**  
**Director of the Servant Leadership Program**

McMurry University's Professional Leadership Program (PLP), now in its second year of existence, reflects the University's core values to prepare students for lives of faith, relationships, learning, excellence and service. In alignment with the Division of Humanities, Religion, and Social Sciences, the PLP offers students across all majors an opportunity to develop the soft skills most admired in leaders – effective communication, ethical judgment, critical thinking, teamwork, and cultural competence – through structured experiences that connect learning to real-world impact.

The program's foundation rests on the conviction that leadership is not defined by position but by purpose. Through events such as the Future Leaders Intensive, Etiquette Luncheon, Professional Summit, and Women's Leadership Student Forum, students cultivate the confidence and character essential for professional and civic life. They may also attend AXIOS Professional Communication Workshops, help facilitate the Taylor County Point-in-Time Count of people experiencing homelessness, and use special funding to attend regional and national conferences exposing them to immersive leadership experiences.

Participants earn Foundations of Leadership and Advanced Leadership certifications by attending a required number of events, engaging in campus leadership roles, and reflecting on personal growth measured by desired PLP outcomes.

Thus far, more than 90 students have been vetted and nominated for the PLP by 40 different faculty and staff. Presently, 47 students are actively engaged in the PLP, with 13 now eligible for certification.

## **Soft Skills, Strong Leaders**

The Professional Leadership Program was designed around the insight that soft skills are powerful skills – the enduring, transferable qualities that distinguish graduates who not only succeed but make a difference. Employers consistently identify abilities such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, and ethical reasoning as among the most desired in the workplace. These same qualities lie at the heart of McMurry's liberal arts tradition and are intentionally cultivated through the PLP.

## **Students in the program learn to:**

- Communicate with clarity and professionalism, mastering both written and interpersonal communication through the AXIOS workshops and networking events.
- Collaborate effectively, applying the principles of shared leadership in team projects and community service experiences.
- Think critically and act ethically, evaluating complex situations with both intellectual rigor and moral discernment.
- Exhibit cultural competence, engaging diverse communities with respect, empathy, and awareness.
- Demonstrate initiative and resilience, setting SMART goals and pursuing them with purpose and accountability.

Each of these abilities—while not tied to any single discipline—translates across professions, making PLP graduates well-equipped for leadership in business, education, law, healthcare, ministry, and public service. More importantly, these skills mirror the Division's broader mission: to help students grow into reflective, compassionate, and courageous human beings who see leadership not as self-advancement, but as a form of service

## **A Legacy that Inspires: Sarah Weddington and the PLP**

The vision and vitality of the PLP are made possible by the extraordinary generosity of Sarah Weddington '64. Her historic \$6 million estate gift to McMurry continues a lifelong commitment to preparing future leaders. A McMurry alumna, attorney, and trailblazer who successfully argued *Roe v. Wade* before the U.S. Supreme Court, Weddington dedicated her life to service, mentorship, and the advancement of others through education. Each cohort of PLP students is a tribute to Weddington, strengthening the McMurry community as a place where humanistic learning meets professional preparation, and where leadership is understood as both a skill and a calling that requires the combination of intellect with compassion and integrity.



## McMurry University Senior Named Rhodes Scholarship Finalist

McMurry University senior Garrison Shin continues to make his mark, earning national recognition as a finalist for the prestigious Rhodes Scholarship.

A political science major with a minor in servant leadership, Shin was selected from a pool of nearly 3,000 applicants nationwide and is one of only 238 students invited to participate in formal interviews for the honor. This marks the first time in 20 years that a McMurry student has advanced to this stage of the competition.

The Rhodes Scholarship, among the world's most esteemed academic awards, funds graduate study at the University of Oxford in England. Only 32 students from the United States are ultimately named Rhodes Scholars each year. Shin is part of District 8, which includes Texas and Oklahoma, and names just two scholars annually.

Interviews for this year's candidates will take place in November, bringing together exceptional students from across the country who have demonstrated outstanding intellect, leadership, and commitment to service.

"Garrison's selection as a Rhodes finalist reflects remarkable discipline, intellectual curiosity, and a heart for service," said Paul Fabrizio, professor of political science. "He represents the best of McMurry's academic excellence and commitment to leadership."

Shin's achievement captures the heart of McMurry's mission—to develop students who think deeply, lead confidently, and serve others.



# ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND HONORS

## THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH



### Lindsey Kaufmann '24

English and honors alum Lindsey Kaufmann '24 was recently honored by the NCCIL at a "Women in Literature Luncheon" for inspiring others to read and be creative. Lindsey is a teacher at an Abilene middle school and came to McMurry as a non-traditional transfer student raising three sons by herself. Lyndsey's honors thesis, "There's Too Many Words on the Page," written under the direction of Dr. Ann-Marie Lopez-Esquivel, inspired her to present at academic conferences at LSU-Shreveport and ACU during her senior year. At ACU's Undergraduate Research, Creativity and Innovation Festival, Lyndsey received the top award for "Outstanding Oral Presentation in the Arts and Humanities." View a video made by the NCCIL about Lyndsey on the Facebook page of the "McMurry University Honors Program."

## THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

### Gretchen Bullock Visiting Instructor of History

- Co-authored a paper with Dr. Frank Badua titled "Considering the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) Virtual Museum among the Array of Online Resources for Items of Accounting History Significance," published in the Accounting Historians Journal.
- Interviewed with Spectrum News One about the history of Abilene's founding.



## THE DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE



### Dr. Tina Bertrand & Dr. Paul Fabrizio Professors of Political Science

- The Political Science Department continues to be the go-to place for the news media looking for political explanation or commentary. The Department faculty have been interviewed on TV, radio, and podcasts regarding local, state, national, and international events.
- The Department's Model United Nations team continues its success with recognition and an award from the international Model United Nations conference in the Galapagos Islands, Ecuador in November 2024. In November 2025, the team is participating in the international conference in Banff, Alberta, Canada.

# THE DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

## Philip LeMasters, Ph.D. Professor of Religion

### Publications

- A review of Stephen M. Meawad, "Beyond Virtue Ethics: A Contemporary Ethic of Ancient Spiritual Struggle," *The Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies*, Volume 7, Numbers 1-2, 2024, pp. 236-238
- *Sex & Salvation* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2025)

### Presentations and Activities

- Presented a paper entitled "The Nicene Faith and Social Ethics: The Church, Marriage, and the World" at Epiphany IV, a conference on the Nicene Faith and Contemporary Issues sponsored by the Alexandria School Foundation for Christian Studies and Agora University in Egypt on July 25-26, 2025.
- Toured the new Grand Egyptian Museum, the Coptic section of Old Cairo, and some of the most ancient monasteries the Christian faith, including St. Antony, St. Paul, St. Makarios, and al-Sourian. He thanks the Drew-McDougal Endowment for funding his travel.



## Mark Waters, Ph.D. Professor of Religion

### Presentations and Activities

- Presentations on a variety of theological formulations of the Holy Trinity delivered separately for three Episcopal congregations and the Inquirers Class at St. Paul United Methodist Church, April-October 2025.
- Delivered sermons at Exodus Metropolitan Community Church, February and June 2025, and at The Refuge, September and October 2025.
- Lectured on Contextual Theology for United Campus Ministries at Angelo State University, April 2025.

### Publications

- "Antitheodicy and Pastoral Formation: A Metacognitive Approach." *Theology Today: Princeton Theological Seminary*, 82, no. 3 (2025), 255-279.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00405736251358476>
- "Amipotence: A Middle Way between Theodicy and Antitheodicy," in Brandon Brown, et.al. eds, *Amipotence: Expansion and Application*, Vol. 2 (Grasmere, Idaho, SacraSage Press), pp. 235-241, 2025.



# THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY AND CRIMINOLOGY



## **Jerry Hollingsworth, Ph.D. Professor of Sociology**

**Special guest speaker for the Taylor County Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution.** A presentation entitled "The Cherokee and the American Revolution: Loyalty, Loss, and Legacy." This lecture explained the Cherokee story during the Revolutionary War as one of strategic alliance, tragic consequence, and enduring resistance.

## **Robert Wallace, Ph.D. Professor of Sociology**

**Reviewed a potential article,** "Wallerstein's Beginnings: The Left, C. Wright Mills and Sociology at Columbia University," for The American Sociologist.



## **David Wahl, Ph.D. Assistant Professor of Sociology**

**Wahl, David W. 2025. "Was I Trafficked? A Disconnect of Shared Meanings in the Adult Film Industry." Journal of Human Trafficking,**  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2025.2545738>.





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