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Building bridges, expanding expression: UWO civic dialogue, free speech efforts earn national partners, standing

Written University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh News Bureau

The University of Wisconsin—Oshkosh (UWO) and its distinctive centers are stepping up their game when it comes to cultivating civic engagement, healthy democracy and student involvement not only on campus but also in the community and Fox Valley region.

It was a banner academic year. And 2025-26 looks to build on new distinctions, designations and partnerships earning UWO some national spotlight, university and center leaders said.

“Great universities are engaged partners and experimenters in these critical topics, and UWO is committed to them,” Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Ed Martini said. “Our relevant UWO centers continue to build collaborations with local, state and national trailblazers dedicated to finding solutions that bridge unproductive divides and confront threats such as misinformation in the age of AI. Meanwhile, we are focused on better engaging students in our classrooms and at campus events to promote more robust, meaningful discussion and debate. We had a big year, and a bigger one is in store.”

**Higher Learning Commission cites UWO as a civic engagement leader**

In March, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), official accreditor of UWO, designated the university as one of, at that time, fewer than 40 institutions in the nation meeting the Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement (CLDE) Coalition’s criteria for designation as a “full participation institution.”

UWO’s response to a spring 2024 Civic Engagement survey demonstrated that the university met requirements for one or more of the categories identified in CLDE’s Learning Framework: “Democratic Knowledge and Levers for Change, Bridge-Building and Problem-Solving Skills, Practical Experience and Projects, and Career-Related Civic and Ethical Learning.”

The CLDE designation took particular note of UWO’s general education program, which builds in a second-year requirement that all students engage in a community engagement experience designed to enhance civic knowledge and promote learners’ integration and involvement in the broader community.

“We’re proud to be recognized for helping instill these fundamentals in UWO students,” Martini said. “The CLDE Coalition calls on higher education ‘to play positive and constructive roles in democracy,’ and we wholeheartedly agree that the learning outcomes they value are the kinds of knowledge, skills and leadership qualities UWO nurtures in students. They propel students and alumni successfully through UWO and into futuristic career and community roles throughout Wisconsin and beyond for decades to come.”

**Whitburn Center partners with WisACT and The Carter Center**

Also in March, UWO’s [Whitburn Center for Governance and Policy Research](https://www.uwosh.edu/whitburn-center/) announced its plans to not only join with the [Wisconsin Alliance for Civic Trust (WisACT)](https://wisact.org/) but also to lead  administration of a new program funded by The Carter Center, the Atlanta-based nonprofit founded by former President Jimmy Carter and first-lady Rosalyn Carter in 1982.

Dr. Sam Larson, Whitburn Center interim director, said The Carter Center’s Conflict Resolution Program works to prevent, mitigate, and resolve conflicts and political violence. This includes “countering all of the misinformation out there—not just about elections, but media that suggests everyone is divided on everything, which is not the case.”

“(Carter) saw the cross-partisan work we (Whitburn) have been doing,” Larson said. “Our initial founding mission aligns really well with WisACT and their goal of bringing together Wisconsinites from the left and right to work together and rebuild trust in democratic institutions. We’re now leading this effort in Wisconsin, along with cross-partisan teams in five other states. The Whitburn Center is on the cutting edge of this.”

WisACT’s programming is now managed by Larson and the Whitburn team, including Dr. Paul Van Auken, UWO professor of sociology. WisACT’s co-founders, former Gov. Scott McCallum, chair of the Whitburn advisory board, and David D. Haynes, a former journalist and editor at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, continue in an advisory role. A privately funded academic center based at UWO, Whitburn’s mission is to conduct nonpartisan, practical, applied research focused on evaluating and improving governance, professional management and public policy in Wisconsin.

Since its founding, WisACT (www.wisact.org) has been supported by The Carter Center. Carter has worked extensively worldwide addressing healthcare challenges and resolving conflicts. It began supporting democracy resilience networks in the United States in 2020; it now supports networks in Wisconsin and five other states—Georgia, Arizona, Florida, Michigan and North Carolina.

Larson said the new partnership fortifies the three entities’ common focus on promoting the common good across differences. This starts with strengthening relationships at the local community level. Whitburn’s work, for starters, will involve the assembly of a regional team from diverse social and political backgrounds to “counteract the polarization narrative.”

A second phase of the work, Larson said, includes piloting a public service leadership development program next year. The program will provide local government civics education, public service career opportunities, and expand civil dialogue and conflict resolution skills for high school and college students. The UWO Center for Civic and Community Engagement and Dr. Matt Richie, associate professor of Criminal Justice and Director of the Fire & Emergency Response Management program, will be key collaborators. The Whitburn Center recently received three additional grants to support the pilot, including a $19,000 Wisconsin Institute for Citizenship and Civic Dialogue (WICCD) grant, a $20,405 Tommy G. Thompson Center on Public Leadership grant, and a $125,000 Mosaic grant in partnership with a nonprofit partner, Root Change.

Upon announcement of their joining, McCallum described the fusion of Whitburn and WisACT as a “perfect fit,” and Haynes said their symbiotic missions will help both respond to takeaways WisACT gleaned in a series of statewide 2024 listening sessions.

“Both are committed to strengthening democratic institutions with a focus on secure elections and building effective local government,” McCallum said.

“One key takeaway from our listening tour last summer was a deep concern across our state over the lack of trust in institutions,” Haynes said. “It’s simply critical that we work together to rebuild that trust.”

WisACT has developed relationships with other organizations concerned with trust-building, including the Wisconsin Council of Churches, LeaderEthics, All Voting is Local, Keep Our Republic, and the MacIver Institute.

As The Carter Center joins the fold and fuels the new initiative, Larson said three UWO student research assistants—Areli Alvarez (Master of Public Administration), Amanda Pierron (Political Science and Social Science Education), and Aspyn Rafac (Political Science)—are already helping with literature reviews, presentations, program design, social media and coalition building efforts this summer. A student taskforce will eventually involve student representatives from Universities of Wisconsin campuses to advance youth engagement, she said. She also envisions a fall semester event “promoting civic health” and a spring 2026 summit is in the works with the UW–Madison Center for Community and Nonprofit Studies.

“To me, we’re on the front lines of democracy building,” Larson said.

**Center for Civic and Community Engagement blossoming**

[UWO’s Center for Civic and Community Engagement](https://www.uwosh.edu/community-engagement/) is also driving the civic engagement renaissance, promoting healthy democracy, building bridges, exposing more students to the spectrum of perspectives and speakers and stoking freedom of expression.

The Center helps educate students to get active in citizenship and leadership development, offering programming that introduces and connects them to local leaders and the issues they are often tackling in their home communities and regions.

“Every year, our programming and initiatives have expanded, and local and state partners, alumni and funders continue to seek us out, asking us to help sponsor and often design the forums and activities that draw in students and enrich their experience and learning outside UWO’s classrooms,” said Mike Lueder, director of the Center for Civic and Community Engagement and Outreach Affiliate for the [Tommy G. Thompson Center on Public Leadership](https://thompsoncenter.wisc.edu/).

The list of initiatives and activities in 2024-25 grew and includes, but wasn’t limited to:

* Development of the Civic Fellows Leadership Program. Fifteen students participated in the program that connects students with campus and community leaders, introducing learners to local issues, strategies for civic and community engagement and how to use their voice to lead. Interactive workshops and networking sessions with local leaders allow them to explore their own values, build their leadership skills and practice strategies for civic and community engagement. Students also explore connections between intercultural knowledge, sustainability and community engagement and consider how these themes connect to career and civic goals.
* Launch of a Fireside Chat Series. The series welcomes community leaders to UWO to share their educational and professional journeys. Guest speakers offered a spectrum of backgrounds and experiences, and each session concludes with some open-mic Q&A to help broaden students’ perspectives on where their educations and student involvement might take them.
* Facilitation of Dialogues Workshops. In partnership with the Division of Enrollment Management and Student Success, the Center hosted a workshop for about 30 faculty and staff members to help learn ways to facilitate better dialogue in the classroom and with student groups. The Center held a follow-up meeting in January to hear from participants about how the lessons they learned were applied throughout the semester.
* Two events sponsored by the UWO-supportive Freedom of Expression Fund at the UW–Oshkosh Foundation: *Me, You, or the Institution: Who Gets to Teach Race?* in which three expert panelists debated the question of who teaches race and in what educational levels and settings? The event shed different perspectives on the issue, reflecting specifically on Act 266, a bi-partisan support bill signed by Gov. Evers in 2023.  The Center and the Freedom of Expression fund also sponsored *How the Constitution and Law Can Save the United States*, which featured speakers Judge Michael Luttig, former judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit, and Linda Greenhouse, formerly from the New York Times covering 29 sessions of the Supreme Court and a 1998 Pulitzer Prize winner.

The Center also hosted *Game Over: Ending Corporate Agriculture’s Game of Monopoly;  an evening with author Austin Frerick*. UWO’s Sustainability Institute for Regional Transformations and the Tommy G. Thompson Center on Public Leadership co-sponsored the event.

Lueder said the Center continued its support of voter registration events, meet-the-candidate forums and blood drives.

“It was a busy year,” he said. “That’s what students expect and deserve as part of their experience at UWO. And they can expect even more opportunities in 2025-26.”