

LSU | Reilly Center for
Media & Public Affairs
Manship School of Mass Communication

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

May 4, 2026

Dear Friends of the Reilly Center,

With the Spring semester ending, I thought this would be a good time to pause, take a breath, and share some updates about the amazing things the Reilly Center team has been up to. The analogy is apt because, whereas 2025 was devoted to hitting the ground running with scores of stakeholder meetings to establish new strategic initiatives for the Reilly Center, in 2026 we never slowed down, but instead found our stride for the much more fun, and rewarding, work of executing those initiatives. Whew.



Not all the work has been earth-changing – but important, nonetheless. As an example, we have (almost) completed a renovation of the Reilly Center office itself, taking what was once a not very popular classroom, and before that a computer lab, and transforming it into a welcoming space for conversation and collaboration, and a resource for students, faculty, partners, and guests alike. Please stop by to see us the next time you're in the Journalism Building.

Our team also assisted with the redesign of the Manship School website, following our successful redesign and launch of the Reilly Center's own new website. We also strategically changed our URL, replacing an alphabet soup of memory-defying letters, with something more straightforward and to the point: www.lsu.edu/reillycenter.

Below you will find images and information about the major initiatives we've tackled in the first part of the year, through the Common Ground Project, our partnership with PAR Louisiana dedicated to understanding and reducing polarization in Louisiana while promoting dialogue and civic thought.

And through the 2026 John Breaux Symposium, the first I have had the pleasure to organize, which explored the theme of American Media at 250, and featured a rousing introductory video by former Sen. John Breaux himself among other highlights at an event that had the feel of being impactful, with a registered attendance of 205.



Not everything has come without bumps in the road, obviously. In fact, just as January began, we received the disappointing news that we missed out (by a whisker) in winning a federal grant award to create the Reilly Center Civic Thought Initiative. Had we won, our proposal, which was developed through partnerships with other schools, departments, and centers across LSU, would have helped expand opportunities for students as Civic Thought Scholars, brought to campus more Civic Thought Fellows, and set the stage for establishing a Civic Thought Minor program of study.

The loss was not without its rewards, however. By establishing these audacious goals under a tight timeline, and strengthening proposal collaborations across campus, we've established momentum that's only building. In short, as you'll see below: we're already accomplishing some of those proposal initiatives by other means. There will be more to come.

As we look ahead, the Reilly Center remains committed to expanding its civic impact, promoting research and dialogue rooted in curiosity, civility, and shared purpose. Thank you for supporting our mission to strengthen public discourse and to advance an informed, engaged Louisiana.

Warm regards,

Michael DiResto

Director, Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs

COMMON GROUND PROJECT

A partnership between the Reilly Center and PAR Louisiana

In response to rising polarization in Louisiana and across the country, the Common Ground Project, launched in August, brings together research, programming, and community engagement to help citizens and students communicate more constructively. Through this nonpartisan initiative, the Reilly Center's academic muscle and PAR's public policy expertise unite to foster civic trust, shared understanding, and meaningful conversation.

Key components include:

- Pizza & Public Affairs
- Civic Sips
- The Common Ground Survey

PIZZA & PUBLIC AFFAIRS

This monthly on-campus discussion series for LSU students features a guest speaker (such as a public official, civic leader, public affairs practitioner, or expert on polarization), in a casual dialogue format over lunch. While each Pizza & Public Affairs event focuses on topics connected to the Manship School's four primary areas of study, speakers are also asked to be prepared to share with students how they have achieved successful policy or program outcomes by building coalitions and communicating in ways that bridge divides.

Gov. John Bel Edwards

In February, we kicked off the first Pizza & Public Affairs of the new year with an incredible conversation featuring former Governor of Louisiana John Bel Edwards. Edwards offered a unique perspective on the challenges and responsibilities of governing, while also highlighting the importance of thoughtful dialogue in shaping our communities.

Gov. Edwards spoke about the ways he worked across party lines, emphasizing that real progress comes from listening, leading with kindness, and treating people across the political spectrum with respect. He also shared advice with students pursuing politics to value relationships and integrity just as much as ideology.



Dr. Johanna Dunaway

In March, we welcomed Johanna Dunaway, former LSU professor and Research Director of Syracuse's Institute for Democracy, Journalism & Citizenship, to speak on political communication, media, and public opinion. Drawing from her experience in academia and research, Dunaway highlighted how journalism and messaging shape the way people understand politics today. Her discussion encouraged students to take a deeper look at the role of media in democracy.

Arnessa Garrett

We wrapped up this semester's Pizza & Public Affairs with Arnessa Garrett, award-winning journalist and Deputy Editor of The Advocate | The Times-Picayune, who spoke about her experiences in journalism and opinion writing. She offered insight into today's evolving media landscape and the importance of clear, thoughtful storytelling in shaping public understanding. Garrett's conversation encouraged students to think critically about the news they consume and the role journalists play in informing and influencing public discourse.

We look forward to seeing students and faculty at Pizza & Public Affairs events next semester!



CIVIC SIPS

Civic Sips continues to be a standout part of our programming, creating space for real conversations in a relaxed, welcoming setting. Over the past year, the series has brought together 200+ attendees across multiple events, drawing a diverse mix of students, professionals, and community members.

Each gathering centers on what matters most: civic responsibility, media literacy, state policy, and how we navigate an increasingly polarized world. Through guided discussions and open dialogue, participants explore where we get our information, how media shapes perception, and what it looks like to engage across differences in a meaningful way.

As part of our ongoing collaboration with the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana through the Common Ground Project, Civic Sips is rooted in a simple idea: progress starts with conversation. By bringing people together face to face, the series encourages thoughtful exchange, challenges assumptions, and builds connections that extend beyond the event itself.

We're excited to continue growing Civic Sips and welcoming even more voices into the conversation.

Stay tuned for the next Civic Sips this summer!



COMMON GROUND SURVEY

The Common Ground Survey, a statewide poll conducted by the Reilly Center's Public Policy Research Lab (PPRL), seeks to measure polarization in Louisiana and identify areas of shared values among citizens. The PPRL has now collected responses from more than 1,000 Louisiana citizens through a combination of phone calls and online polling, with the data currently being analyzed by a crack team comprised of the Reilly Center, PAR, and Manship School scholars.

Look for a report on the survey results coming soon!

JOHN BREAUX SYMPOSIUM

The Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs recently hosted its annual John Breaux Symposium at the LSU Old Cook Alumni Center, bringing together scholars, journalists, and thought leaders for a timely conversation on this year's theme, "American Media at 250." Marking the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, the symposium explored how media has shaped American democracy from the Founding era to today—and what that history reveals about our rapidly evolving media landscape.

Throughout the morning, panels examined key issues including the relationship between the press and political communication, the historical roots of misinformation, and the growing influence of social media on local news, civil discourse, and political polarization. Discussions also addressed the challenges of navigating an increasingly fragmented media environment and the rise of independent media voices.

Featured speakers included Jonah Goldberg, Carl Cannon, Jack Hamilton, Johanna Dunaway, Sunshine Hillygus, and Jordan Taylor. Panel discussions were moderated by Suzanne L. Marchand and Mike Henderson, fostering thoughtful and engaging dialogue among participants.

As one organizer noted, "The Reilly Center remains committed to promoting dialogue rooted in curiosity, civility, and shared purpose." The symposium reflected that mission by encouraging meaningful conversation about the past, present, and future of media in American civic life.



CIVIC MINDED SCHOLARS

As mentioned above in the Director's letter, despite missing out on a federal grant, the Reilly Center is leaning in on expanding its civic impact by supporting professors and students alike. In March, in addition to bringing her to campus to speak at Pizza & Public Affairs and the John Breaux Symposium, the Reilly Center was pleased to announce that Dr. Dunaway has been named its 2026 Public Policy Fellow. With her expertise in media and polarization, Dunaway had already served as an important advisor to the Reilly Center and PAR during the development stage of the Common Ground Project and was a perfect fit for reviving the Fellows program with a civic-minded focus. As a Fellow, she will engage with our university and the surrounding community to promote informed discussions based on

her research in civic literacy, citizen news engagement and democratic deliberation, with a specific focus on the effects of mobile communication on all three.



One such upcoming engagement with the LSU community will happen in October, when Reilly Center director DiResto will co-host, along with LSU professors Dr. Suzanne Marchand from the History Department and Dr. Jim Stoner from the Political Science Department, twelve prominent civic-minded scholars from across the country, including Dunaway, for a two-day seminar. Supported by the Alliance for Civics in the Academy and the American Historical Association, the seminar sessions will explore the theme of "Historical Thinking and Civic Education."



Similarly, on the student level, through its growing civic-focused national network, Reilly Center student worker and Manship School political communications junior Grace Jones took the initiative to apply for Pepperdine University's Summer Certificate Seminar program and got accepted! This weeklong seminar, hosted by Pepperdine's School of Public Policy on its campus in Malibu, CA, will focus on the theme of "Roots of American Order," with the core feature of the program a series of discussion-based participant colloquy sessions to delve deeply into primary documents. The purpose of the program is "to develop leaders in civic virtue so they can utilize this knowledge on their college campuses, in their

communities, and in their future vocations." We're so proud of Grace, and can't wait to see how she applies what she learns from this seminar when she returns to the Reilly Center at the start of her senior year this fall.

THANK YOU TO OUR STUDENT WORKERS



As we celebrate our graduating student workers, we are excited to recognize their next steps and bright futures ahead of them. AnnMarie Bedard will be heading to Washington, D.C., to begin her career with Advocacy Associates. Julia Russell will begin her new job as RNR Coordinator for the School of Renewable Natural Resources at the LSU AgCenter. Dorene Hantzis will join Teach For America in Indianapolis as an elementary educator while pursuing her master's degree and plans to later pursue a Ph.D. focused on institutional accountability and interpersonal violence.

We are so proud and excited for these soon-to-be graduates and look forward to celebrating their next chapters!

JOIN OUR TEAM

Do you or someone you know want to join a winning team that's making a real difference? The Reilly Center has opened the search process to hire a new Program Coordinator, a position that serves as a key partner to the Director in advancing the Reilly Center's mission to elevate public discourse at the local, state, and national levels, through programming and research creating positive civic impact for LSU students and Louisiana's citizens.

[Find Out More and Apply Here](#)

SUPPORT THE REILLY CENTER'S CIVIC IMPACT

If you're inspired by any of our projects and initiatives and would like to help us expand our civic impact, please consider making a gift through the LSU Foundation, by:

1. Clicking the Give Now button below.
2. Under Designations, selecting Manship School of Mass Communication.
3. Choosing the Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs Fund.

OR: To make it even easier, type "Reilly" into the search bar and select the Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs Fund.

Thank you for your support!

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