Five questions for William B. Allen[1]
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The one idea that William B. Allen wants students in his classes to take from his teaching is that "they are perfectly capable of discovering why they believe what they believe and assessing whether it makes sense to believe it."

That notion likely extends beyond the university community. In his role during the last academic year as Visiting Scholar in Conservative Thought and Policy at the University of Colorado Boulder's Bruce D. Benson Center for the Study of Western Civilization, he often gave presentations to community groups and found participants looking for answers regarding the divisiveness the country is experiencing.

"I found very receptive audiences," he said. "People are hungry – they are eager – to get someone to answer the question, 'How can we all live together and what do we have in common?' They want to hear more about what makes us the same, because they have experienced such heart-wrenching distraction on what makes us different."

Allen is emeritus dean at James Madison College and emeritus professor of political philosophy at Michigan State University. He has served as chairman for the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, as a member for National Council on the Humanities, and as executive director on the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, among other offices.

During the upcoming academic year, he is Visiting Senior Scholar at the Benson Center.

1. What about the position of Visiting Scholar in Conservative Thought and Policy appealed to you, and what did you enjoy about the experience?

When I was recruited to consider the position, my initial reaction was that I don't teach conservative thought or conservative policy. What I do is pursue – in the discipline in which I work, political philosophy – are the questions of human understanding and the search for truth. But upon reflection and consideration of what CU was attempting to do, it occurred to me that the title was just a name and didn't really capture what was possible. I became interested in participating in an effort to expand the reach of inquiry in the university such that it would foster greater attention to openness, to analysis and demonstration. And that's what I do.

The most important thing that occurred during the first year was the absolutely extraordinary experience I had in the classroom and the wonderful students with whom I worked. It turned into a capstone teaching experience for me, and that is a lot to say. It meant that I got some of the finest performances from students I've ever had in my career. As I've explained to people on other occasions, among several examples, is that I got the best single undergraduate paper I've ever seen. It clearly was a moment of significant opportunity for me to interact with students who were genuinely appreciative for the opportunity to learn. I was greatly encouraged and fulfilled by the experience, and that alone is what persuaded me to accept an invitation to return to CU a second year.

2. How do you define "conservative thought" and how does it relate to what we would call conservatism in today's political theater?

I don't think about conservative thought. I'm aware that for the past few generations there has been a conservative movement and a conservative intellectual tradition that has developed, but I think it is misunderstood and misrepresented as conservatism. Rather, it is a line of inquiry or several lines of inquiry that people have pursued – particularly in politics – for conservative objectives. They have found an opportunity to explore ideas and issues that enable them to expand their understanding of what they were trying to accomplish. It is not because one is teaching conservatism, but one is teaching fundamental truths about human society and culture. Since they are always looking for the indication in the study and science of culture about how to advance their particular approaches, whether political or cultural, there's a natural intersection there, but it is not because one seeks to teach conservatism, it's because one seeks to unfold the interlinked structures of human community.

My teaching almost always focuses on primary sources. They obviously are the primary sources in the philosophic tradition – the classics of Western civilization primarily. The second source would consist very importantly of the primary sources of transcendent moments of political accomplishments – world historical moments in politics. An

obvious one would be the American founding, which is where the political accomplishments of the era transcend their own time and are not really transitory but have a lasting influence both in terms in successions of people who follow their impetus and also in terms of highlighting human possibilities. So it is reaching for primary examples of reflection in the tradition of political philosophy and history or in articulation of traditions of political accomplishment in those transcendent world historical moments.

Those are the areas I have focused on and from which I seek to draw out and elicit the bases for continuing reflection on what is possible for human beings, and what actually constitutes the foundations and the framework, the proficiency of humanity. There's one thing that we all do, no matter who we are or what perspective we come from, no matter what goals we seek to accomplish. At the end of the day, we're seeking to express fundamentally what it is to be human and to be proficient.

3. Your current research interests include looking at national character and the sources of fragmentation among American citizens. What is "national character" and what types of things are fragmenting our society?

One of the things I have observed in recent years is that the origins in that world historical transcendent moment I mentioned is a focus on building the national character. George Washington was the first to identify this as the project that was at the heart of the founding. It wasn't just a matter of designing institutions or writing laws, it was really shaping a people who would, in fact, express a unique approach to the carrying out of being human. And so this idea that we have a national character to establish, and those were George Washington's words, create the underlying question of, is there such a thing, and if there is, what does it mean to establish it? Is it the case that in a given national community, people can be more or less the same in some fundamental respect? I'm not talking about the question of equality now, but I'm talking about the broader moral questions. Can people really approach life from a common perspective? That's what national character is about.

My inquiries for the last four years or so have been devoted to asking these questions: What is this national character? What is it founded in? How is it accomplished if it is accomplished? Is it something that lasts – sustained through centuries – or is it something that is rather transient?

Maybe people have (national character) for a time and then for a time they don't have it. In the 19th century, when we reached the crisis of the Civil War, what Abraham Lincoln identified as greatly at stake was precisely the question of national character – in this case the extent to which it included devotion to the principle of equality. He worked hard to re-cement, re-institute that devotion to equality as part of the expression of what it means to be an American and therefore the guiding principle for American politics.

In my research, I ask if there is still today any firm sense of national character that essentially defines the way Americans look at themselves in the world around them. One of the things I have observed is that the primary points of reference have changed from what they were at the founding, and even immediately after the aftermath of the Civil War, to a point today that raises whether there is still any national character at all, i.e., whether we have not become so diverse in our perspectives and our perceptions we could no longer speak of having a common perception. And, if we have one, whether it is not distinctly at cross purposes with that which used to exist.

The most obvious source of fragmentation in our society today is what we call identity politics. We've seen that we've driven what we might consider perceptions of differences among us to the point where we have called into question whether we have anything in common at all. It is not sufficient simply to be subject to the same laws to say you have something in common because that means we are held together by nothing other than fear of authority. We have to obey the law, or we will be punished, and so we have a common fear. The question is, is there anything beyond fear that holds us together? The more we drive the issues of identity politics, the more we create at least the impression that we have nothing other than fear that holds us together anymore.

4. Your research also talks about "practices and principles" that can reunite American citizens. It seems that the gulf is widening. What will it take for us, as a nation, to be unified? Or can we be unified?

That is the question of the hour. Presently, my most recent writing on the subject is at the point of wondering exactly whether there is a way out of the hole that we've dug for ourselves. I'm continuing to work on that and convey what

opportunities there might be to restructure. It doesn't necessarily mean recovering what was in the past, but it may mean being able to replicate the past when the common perceptions that were applied to each person who refers to himself or herself as American meant the same thing.

Classically, that has centered on our notion of right. We might say if we had something that we all shared in common, it was the belief that we had certain rights and we would live in accord with this right. But that, of course, is what has changed at least over the course of the 20th century and into the 21th century, where we have been subject to a complete redefinition. We no longer see those rights as an expression of common humanity, but instead, we see them as a series or sequence of individual claims, i.e., I have rights and my rights are not necessarily your rights, or if they are the same, they don't rise to any higher status than the peculiar claims of wanting some degree of security, whether it is material security or emotional security. And that is how we tend to talk about it today. The question becomes, is there some way to recover the language of right which affirms our capabilities and not our wants, the things that we lay claim to but don't have.

We have tended to fall into a pattern of thinking of ourselves as a needy people needing to be taken care of rather than as an able people capable of providing. What I am looking at is, is there some way to revive a sense of rights that is understood as agency and power and self-sufficiency so that people can bond together in common expectations of their mutual resourcefulness and capacity to get things done.

I'm focused on this for the moment as the most important thing that requires attention from the point of view of political philosophy because it is urgent to answer the question whether what happened at the founding was a mere transient moment in human history or whether it identified permanent potential for humans, something that can always be called upon in order to structure decent human life. Can we live as a people who take the obligations of decency seriously, which means having a certain regard for one another when living in community, or must we forever abandon that expectation? I'm trying to answer those questions.

5. You'll be teaching a class titled "The Empire of Modern Science." What are you hoping to accomplish with this class?

It is to bring the students to view the questions of science from the perspective of what science means as a human undertaking. So it is not a question of the technical capabilities of science or the technology or a question of something like climate change or any other of the fashionable questions of the day. The question is, is science like many other things, a human practice, and what is its basis, what does it do, what is its discipline, and how far can we rely upon it? What are we saying about ourselves when we foster commitment to science, since science has come to dominate culturally from the 18th century on – but at least from the 19th century? Because of that, we are a people who largely determine our orientation to the world on the basis of scientific presuppositions, so we want to explore those scientific presuppositions that define how we look at the world. In previous ages, the presuppositions were different. They were superstitious in some eras, and in other eras, they were primarily religious, which some might call superstitious as well. In our age, the general presuppositions are scientific, and I want to make those presuppositions explicit and clear and invite students to reflect upon them.

Nominations open for CU Excellence in Leadership Award[3]
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Do you know a University of Colorado faculty or staff member who has participated in the Excellence in Leadership Program[5]?

The Excellence in Leadership Program (ELP) is accepting nominations for the 2019 Excellence in Leadership Award. The submission deadline is Oct. 11.

ELP is a university-wide program that provides opportunities for faculty and staff to become more effective leaders who can successfully address the key challenges of a dynamic university.

The Excellence in Leadership Award recognizes an ELP alumnus who has shown exemplary leadership at the university in one or more areas:
Leadership of organizations, departments or teams Leadership of projects, programs and/or research Fiscal management and/or fundraising Student instruction
The award recipient and the nominator will be recognized at the Excellence in Leadership Luncheon and Lecture on Nov. 22 at Denver's Brown Palace Hotel.

Nomination details:

The award is open to ELP alumni[6] who are currently working at the University of Colorado.

Submit the nomination form[7] on the Employee Services website. The deadline to submit a nomination is 5 p.m. Friday, Oct. 11.

If you have questions, please contact ELPAwards@cu.edu[8].

Sleeping too much—or too little—boosts heart attack risk[9]

CU Boulder lab works to bring quanta out of the cold[10]

Horowitz Piano Festival brings concerts and opportunities to play historic piano Sept. 16-21 [11]

A holistic approach to the health challenges of tomorrow [12]

Scientists use advanced imaging to map uncharted area of genome [13]

Summer internship teaches Pine Ridge students, broadens CU Nursing's reach [14]

Trauma nursing book tackles new-world issues [15]

Gonzales named new program director of Chancellor's Leadership Class and UCCSlead[16]

Eight UCCS faculty selected as Ethics Fellows[17]

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