



The Jack Miller Center Announces 2026 Teaching Excellence Award Winners

PHILADELPHIA, PA — September 24, 2026 The Jack Miller Center has announced the winners of the 5th annual Teaching Excellence Award. Senior scholar **Vincent Phillip Muñoz** of the University of Notre Dame, along with junior scholar **Danielle Charette James** of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, have received the 2026 awards in higher education. **Mirelle A. Rivera** of Walter Payton College Preparatory High School in Chicago won in the category of primary and secondary educators, with **Eric Maurer** of Regina Angelorum Academy in Ardmore, Pennsylvania receiving an honorable mention.

At the Jack Miller Center, we have met thousands of educators across the country who are inspiring their students to be more engaged and thoughtful citizens. Civic learning depends on these men and women that have devoted their lives to cultivating young minds.

The Teaching Excellence Award is an annual honor recognizing college and K-12 educators who do an exceptional job engaging students in the story of America through primary documents, new courses, and/or extracurricular activities.

To select our annual awardees, JMC assesses student nominations, field evaluations, and in-depth reports from the nominees themselves. Through our rigorous process, we find the best and brightest civic educators in America. It is always an experience that fills us with immense hope and demonstrates the ongoing influence great teachers have in the classroom and beyond.

“America’s civics teachers have a special part to play in the continuity of our republic,” JMC President Hans Zeiger said. “Civic educators have the responsibility of inviting the next generation into the work of citizenship, and it is right that we celebrate those who are doing this with excellence. The 2026 Teaching Excellence Award winners are truly setting the standard for the profession and making a difference for our country.”

Senior Scholar Winner

Vincent Phillip Muñoz is the Tocqueville Professor of Political Science, Concurrent Professor of Law, and the Founding Director of the [Center for Citizenship & Constitutional Government](#) at the University of Notre Dame.

Muñoz's peer nominators were inspired by his resounding impact on students, fellow scholars, and the very field of political science itself: "There are certainly those whose thought shapes our regime, whose teaching shapes souls, whose institution-building shapes a generation of scholars, or who are the model for an entire field of thought. But someone who embodies all of these contributions is a generational treasure. Phil is one such rare treasure."

Muñoz is the founder of not only the Center for Citizenship & Constitutional Government at Notre Dame, but the university's J.D. and Ph.D. programs in Constitutional Studies. Aside from higher education endeavors, he also volunteers his time to leading seminars for high school teachers. His mentorship has had a lasting impact far and wide, with several of his former students going on to become professors and leading civic centers on campuses across the country.

Nominators made special note of the driving force behind all Muñoz's academic achievements: his truly good, exemplary character. "At a time of such turmoil in university life, Muñoz's principled devotion is perhaps his most precious gift to the students, colleagues, family, and friends who know him and the thousands of citizens who attend his Center's programs."

In response to winning the award, Muñoz reflected on his experiences with the Jack Miller Center, remarking: "The Jack Miller Center has played an important part of my entire academic career, from my first book to founding a center of civic thought at the University of Notre Dame. I am enormously grateful to Jack and Goldie Miller and JMC for this award, but more importantly, for their important work of restoring the teaching of America's founding principles to their rightful place in higher education and American civic life. Working alongside them has been a labor of love."

Junior Scholar Winner

Danielle Charette James is an Assistant Professor in the School of Civic Life and Leadership at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

James's award application highlighted her devotion to lively student engagement, not just inside the classroom, but in preparation for the community civic life that endures long after graduation. Throughout her career, she has led extracurricular student reading groups in which undergrads read, discuss, and debate the writings that have influenced American political life, including Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, Machiavelli's *Discourses*, and Edmund Burke's *Reflections*.

"What I like most about these evening reading groups is that they offer students a model for maintaining a communal life of the mind outside the traditional seminar room," James reflects. "In this sense they serve as a springboard for local civics. A persistent anxiety I've heard from my brightest UNC and UVA students is that they fear they won't have the same opportunities for reading and discussion after graduation. I try to reassure them that this is a false choice. Ben Franklin never went to grad school; in fact, he never went to college (though he did have a knack for collecting honorary degrees). With a little practice, any intelligent citizen can start a club to read serious literature with friends."

Her students additionally appreciate James's willingness to approach challenging aspects of American history. For example, Thomas Jefferson's role as a slaveholder can be baffling and downright troubling, but James's approach to the topic left her students motivated to learn more. "This was the material that most engaged them," she noticed. "All were critical of Jefferson, but none protested our study of him. One biology major proclaimed as he filed out of the room that tensions like these were why he loved American history. Jefferson became the author the students most wanted to analyze in their essays and exams."

On her Teaching Excellence Award, James responds: "I've learned a lot about teaching from some of the past recipients of this award, and I'm honored to count myself among a set of scholars who think small seminars, cheap paperbacks, and lively conversation are the most important ingredients in liberal learning. My own education unfolded mainly in seminars and reading groups, and I'm grateful for the resources to share a similar experience with my students at UVA and now at UNC, as well as for the chance to participate in various shorter courses for social studies teachers over the summer."

K-12 Winner

Mirelle A. Rivera is a Social Studies Teacher at Walter Payton College Preparatory High School in Chicago, Illinois.

During this special semiquincentennial year, Rivera has taken special care to focus on the Declaration of Independence and its principles, inviting her students to take ownership of the document, "Citizen formation, as I understand it, begins with students internalizing that they are the inheritors of an unfinished project. The Declaration doesn't just tell us what America proclaimed; it tells us what America is still obligated to become. Teaching it that way gives students a reason to care."

She believes in empowering her students to reason through tough constitutional questions in a civil and fruitful manner and is especially proud of classroom debates that inspire deeper thinking: "What moved me wasn't that students reached consensus. They didn't, entirely. What moved me was the quality of disagreement. They asked each other real questions. They cited sources by name. They acknowledged the limits of their own arguments. This is what civic education is supposed to produce: not citizens who agree, but citizens who can reason together, hold complexity, and stay in the room when the conversation gets hard. The Declaration of Independence promises self-governance. This discussion reminded me that self-governance is a skill, and it must be taught."

Rivera is particularly passionate about quality access to civics education for all students, no matter where they live: "I am acutely aware that the kind of civic education I can offer; grounded in primary sources, Supreme Court jurisprudence, and structured academic discussion is not the norm across Chicago, let alone the country. Many students never encounter a serious civics course before they turn eighteen and are handed a ballot." She doesn't just lament the problem however, but takes action, advocating for civics curriculum resources that can be used not only in her school, but at any school, stating "Democracy requires an informed citizenry."

On her award, Rivera responds: “I am deeply humbled to receive the Jack Miller Center’s 2026 K-12 Teaching Excellence Award, a recognition that profoundly reinvigorates my passion for this vital work. It is a powerful reminder of the importance of civic literacy and the incredible potential of our young people. I am immensely grateful to the Jack Miller Center for championing educators, my mentors and colleagues across CPS who have supported my journey, and above all, my family and my students, whose sharp insights and commitment to civic engagement inspire me every day.”

K-12 Honorable Mention

Eric Maurer is an Eighth Grade Teacher and Director of Classical Engagement at Regina Angelorum Academy in Ardmore, Pennsylvania.

Maurer’s lessons frequently combine literature and U.S. history, with a special emphasis on reading classic works. Students engage with eras of history by reading authors from Washington Irving to Mark Twain to Ray Bradbury.

Maurer’s nominators, parents of his students, were impressed by the ways that he goes above and beyond to build confidence and inspire a love of learning in their children. He truly believes in students’ capacity for knowledge – the words “Socratic seminar” may sound academic (and a bit intimidating, even to adults!) but Eric’s students love participating in these conversations.

“The students came prepared, engaged in thoughtful discussion, and were truly up to the task because Mr. Maurer had raised the bar so high. He created an environment where students knew their ideas mattered and where they were expected to think critically, listen to one another, and contribute meaningfully,” parents noted. “He doesn’t lower expectations to make learning easier; he inspires students to meet higher expectations and discover what they are capable of.”

Maurer doesn’t just teach civic education in the classroom – he lives it. One parent reflects, “Mr. Maurer is a wonderful leader and role model. My children have learned so much from him—not only about our country, but about respect, responsibility, service, gratitude, and what it means to be part of a community. What I appreciate most is the example he sets every day. I have watched him teach boys to hold the door for others, straighten a tie, show respect, and stand tall when saying the Pledge of Allegiance. These may seem like small moments, but they are the everyday lessons that help shape young people into responsible, respectful citizens.”

Lessons aren’t just academically beneficial, but fun! “Students get in the habit of reading carefully, citing the text to support their points, and ask me about the large or antiquated words. I get down and do 5 pushups if I don’t know a word.” Maurer explained.

Reflecting on the award and his years teaching, Maurer stated: “I am especially honored to receive this award from the Jack Miller Center, as they provided me with the best professional development in my 17 years teaching this past summer, when we read and discussed 184 pages of U.S. primary texts with 3 college professors at Villanova.

By going ad fontes ["back to the sources"] in our history classes we can enthuse students, as older books are more challenging, edgy, and interesting. If the Founding Fathers, as well as Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt, read and reread Plutarch, Thucydides, Livy, etc., we must do the same to appreciate the Declaration, the Constitution, and the principles and debates that formed them."

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ABOUT THE JACK MILLER CENTER

The Jack Miller Center is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization advancing the work of scholars who teach and study the ideas, documents, and history we hold in common as Americans. We seek to grow the talent pipeline of university educators who teach the American political tradition, to forge new models for university-based training of K-12 civics and history teachers, and to build a diverse coalition of Americans to ignite a civic education renaissance.

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