The American Democracy Project at MTSU
By Mark Byrnes

For the past several years, MTSU has been participating in the American Democracy Project (ADP), a national effort to increase civic engagement among college students. Political scientists have long known that, as a group, 18 to 24 year olds vote at a rate lower than that of any other age group. Scholars have explained this by noting that young adults often have weak ties to their communities. They may be attending college away from their home town, they often move for career opportunities, they are less likely to have children in the local school systems, they are less likely to own homes and pay property taxes, and so on. The less engaged people are in their community, the less likely they are to vote.

Overcoming this disengagement poses quite a challenge. To make the effort, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), of which MTSU is a member, gave birth to the ADP. MTSU’s provost, Dr. Kaylene Gebert, was an early supporter of the project and committed MTSU to participate. Today, more than 200 state colleges and universities around the nation are involved with the ADP. I have served as the MTSU coordinator for the project since its inception on campus.

The MTSU ADP has led several initiatives. We have helped bring a variety of speakers to campus, including former Vice President Al Gore, Tennessee Comptroller John Morgan, and, this fall, historian David McCullough. We have worked with the Provost’s office and the New York Times to try to get students to read newspapers regularly. In 2004, we held a major voter registration drive, which included a lively forum on the film Fahrenheit 9/11 (with the Republican response given by our own Dr. John Vile), a “political karaoke” event at which students gave their political opinions to a large group gathered at the knoll, registration tables, and a mock election. We will do some of the same events in preparation for this fall’s elections. In addition, in October we will host a forum for candidates for local state legislative offices.

Also this fall, MTSU will take part in a nationwide experiment, sponsored by AASCU and the national ADP, to see what methods work best at getting college students to register to vote and, even more importantly, see if the method used to register them affects whether they actually turn out to vote. Faculty members across campus will be asked to devote 15 minutes or so of class time to register students to vote (some will be registered by the professor, others by fellow students). The results will be sent to the project leader, a political scientist at Indiana University South Bend, for analysis. MTSU’s goal is to obtain new voter registrations from 5 percent of the student population, which equates to roughly 1,150 students.

Civic engagement encompasses more than just voting and political activities, however. Doing volunteer work, participating in civic clubs, being part of neighborhood associations, and even keeping abreast of current events are all elements of being civically engaged. To foster these kinds of engagement among our students, MTSU has
established an active service learning program. Led by English professor Ron Kates, students do volunteer work for community organizations and write reflective papers on their experiences. These projects complement the Political Science department’s highly successful internship programs. They also mesh well with the university-wide effort to emphasize experiential learning (EXL).