



CENTER FOR ETHICS
AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Year in Review

The Center For Ethics and Public Engagement

Luther College

2025-2026 Academic Year

[The CEPE](#)

The Luther College Center for Ethics and Public Engagement (The CEPE, pronounced “The Keep”) is a hub for interdisciplinary programming that empowers students, faculty, and community members to explore the ethical dimensions of public life. Rooted in the liberal arts and grounded in civic responsibility, The CEPE fosters opportunities for dialogue, critical reflection, and imaginative action on the most pressing issues of our time.

The CEPE Staff: Andy Hageman (Director) and Jenny Kunka (Assistant Director)

The CEPE Advisory Board Roster: Prof. Dawn Reding, Pastor Melissa Bills, Prof. Hongxiao Yu, and Mr. Scott Propson

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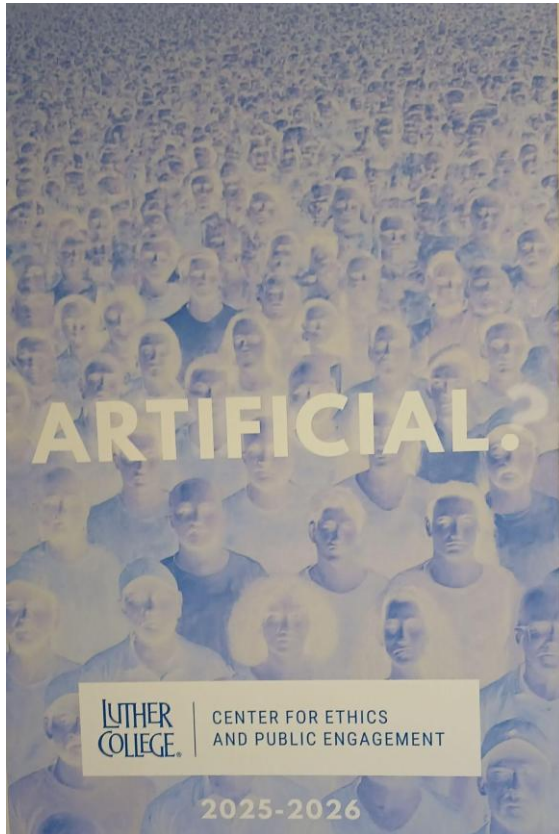
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Year-Long Theme:

Artificial.?

The guiding theme for our 2025-2026 programming was **Artificial.?** We intentionally kept the theme to this single word. One reason was to short circuit the immediate impulse to “auto-fill” the word “Intelligence” after it. We wanted to put friction into the foundation of thinking and talking about so-called Artificial Intelligence. The second reason was to open other conversations around notions of what different people or groups may define as natural or not—from climate change to people, capital, and data migrating around the planet.

Throughout the year, The CEPE organized and supported transdisciplinary events that encouraged students to wrestle with the idea of “Artificial.?” as well as other ideas and challenges at the forefront of cultural and political conversations.

This was also an unusual year at The CEPE, since Andy Hageman was on sabbatical in the fall, conducting research in the Stephen King Archive in Bangor, Maine. In anticipation of this situation, The CEPE had invited staff and faculty to apply in Spring 2025 for grants to fund speakers and projects that would benefit Luther students and the wider community in Fall 2025. With a diverse list of fall events (see below), faculty and staff promoted student learning through research, curiosity, debate, problem solving and asking deeper questions about what is needed from humanity to address challenges in the world. These events also encouraged students to imagine where their skills, knowledge, and talents are needed to address pressing issues.

We open this report as we open all our events-

with a Land Acknowledgement:

The land on which Luther College stands has been home to the Ioway, Sac, Fox, and Dakota people and their ancestors. As part of the Neutral Ground, created by the US government to control the movement, lives, and livelihood of Native peoples, this land was home to the Ho-Chunk during their forced displacement from Wisconsin. The dispossession of the Ioway, Sac, Fox, and Dakota and the forced migration of the Ho-Chunk people was motivated by the interests of settlers such as those who founded this town and this college.

The Ho-Chunk, during their residence here, addressed the land as “Grandmother.” The tribe’s orator, Waukon Decorah, believed his people were extended the blessing of this place by the Great Spirit, saying, “We did not make it nor could we make it so pretty and fair a land.” Please honor this history, and the ongoing connection of the descendants of these early residents to this place. Please also honor and care for the land, water, and resources as these residents have: like a loved and loving elder.

With this grounding, The CEPE strives to host events that are inclusive, thought-provoking, and responsive to the ethical questions shaping our world. From public lectures and creative collaborations to participating in research and experiential formats, the following is a selection of events produced and financially supported by The CEPE throughout the 2025–2026.

Fall 2025

All of the events in Fall 2026 were created and delivered by wonderful colleagues at Luther College along with some community collaborations. The CEPE's role was strictly to lend financial support to our colleagues' visions and objectives. What follows is a report of the robust student-focused work happening at Luther. We share it to promote and recognize learning opportunities available for Luther students and the wider community.

September

The Ground We Share: Conversations on Soil, Food, and Health

Luther College hosted Anne Biklé for a series of events over multiple days.

Dr. Jodi Enos-Berlage, Professor of Biology, organized this event with the assistance of the [Regenerating Soil and Community Project](#), other Decorah organizations and funding from The CEPE. Promotion for the event said that, as a science writer and public speaker, "Biklé explores humankind's relationship with nature through the lens of agriculture, soil, and food." She served as an author-in-residence at Luther, while also interacting with the farmer-led regenerative agriculture community in northeast Iowa.

During Anne Biklé's time at Luther she gave a keynote address titled "Linking Soil Health to Human Health". Dr. Enos-Berlage said before the talk, students and the wider community had the opportunity to:

- Engage with soil health & water quality demonstrations (Regenerating Soil and Community Student/Faculty team)
- Learn about regenerative agriculture practices (Winneshiek County Soil and Water Conservation District)
- Experience and taste healthy food produced from the Driftless (Oneota Food Co-op)
- Peruse and check out gardening, cooking, and health books (Decorah Public Library)
- Connect with expertise elevating that food is health (Erin Meyer, MSFS RD)
- Watch the prelude dance performance presented by the Luther College Orchestris Dance Group.

Biklé's keynote was followed by a Soil, Food, and Health Conversation and Q&A with an award-winning panel of local/regional soil and human health care providers. Through the pre-talk event, keynote and the following time for Q&A, students heard from leaders who are studying links between food and the health of our bodies and the planet, as well as people who are taking action through their work and daily choices.

Student Reflections on the event:

“The talk tonight shifted my perspective by framing soil as the foundation of the complex system behind human health and environmental health. Learning about how regenerative practices can substantially improve soil quality and food nutrient content has made me curious to learn about what agricultural practices are more commonly used.”

“The dancing and Anne's mention of how science and art are often thought of as separate things showed me a different way of thinking about how the soil was depicted by the dancers. I think the crossover between dancing and soil reached a greater audience.”

“These talks inspired me to think more about how I could make an impact on the soil around my own house and garden. While my family and I have very little land area, I am aware of the impact and improvements that could be made to the soil.”

October

Digital Forces: AI and the Criminal (In)justice System

Organized by Dr. Char Kunkel, Professor of Sociology.

As Dr. Kunkel wrote, “With new technologies in surveillance as well as changes in criminal justice system (CJS) sentencing, training, evaluation, efficiency, and bias, this panel challenged students to consider the pros and cons of AI use in the CJS, along with ethical considerations.” The panel discussion included a lawyer, and a police officer, both Luther alums. Rounding out the panel was Dr. Christian Schlaerth, Associate Professor of Sociology at Luther.

The police officer and lawyer drew on the real world applications of AI in their professions and ways that AI has improved efficiency in their work. They also presented dangers that AI could pose to the justice system. The sociology professor explained how large language models worked and all three panelists challenged participants to think about productive usage of AI vs. unproductive usage. The discussion was followed

by a Q&A for students. Additionally, students were encouraged to share their thoughts one-on-one with panelists after the program.

Luther College now has a criminology track. This event connected to that focus and was also of interest to students from majors as diverse as: computer and data science, sociology, psychology and English.

The Past, Present and Future of Soil Erosion in the United States

Organized by Dr. Laura Peterson Professor of Environmental Studies

Iowa native and geoscientist Isaac Larsen visited Dr. Peterson's soils class and the Luther campus last fall. Larsen, who is a professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, has recently published two large studies on agricultural erosion in the midwest, one of which concluded that 30% of agricultural soil in the US corn belt has lost its topsoil completely.



Students from Dr. Peterson's soils class with Isaac Larsen (holding clump of soil)

Highlights of Dr Larsen's visit:

- Larsen accompanied Dr. Peterson's students on a lab which involved farm visits, showing curiosity in their work.
- The next day, Dr. Larsen invited students to one of his research sites near Decorah, providing an opportunity for students to experience, first-hand, the work of a well-known soil scientist.
- Dr Laura Peterson planned a dinner with local farmers and people doing watershed work which allowed Larsen to learn what is being done in NE Iowa to improve soils and also gave local farmers and ecologists an opportunity to hear about Dr. Larsen's research.

The visit culminated with an evening lecture on campus for students, faculty/staff and the community. The lecture was titled, "The Past, Present and Future of Soil Erosion in the United States."

Dr. Laura Peterson, Professor of Environmental Studies, invited Dr. Larsen because she wanted her students to meet someone who was actively pursuing the question of soil erosion and doing research in the field. "Sometimes we have a tendency to think that lab work has no relevance to the world, but this is a pressing societal problem and I want students to see that science can make a difference," she said.

November

The CEPE funds a faculty research fellowship each year. The 2025-2027 faculty research fellow is Assistant Professor of Management, Hongxiao Yu. Professor Yu's research is focusing on how users perceive and trust AI in decision-making contexts. In November, Dr. Yu hosted the following event to provide learning for students and to continue gathering data for her research.

Artificial Intelligence: What's Next?

As part of the 2026–2027 Faculty Research Fellow project, Dr. Yu said she wanted to plan an "immersive experience for the Luther College community to understand, engage with, and critically reflect on the growing influence of artificial intelligence (AI) in education, the workplace, and everyday life." Her goal was to bring academic and industry perspectives together for dialogue between disciplines, so students and the community could hear a variety of perspectives and engage in conversations about "the possibilities, challenges, and ethical implications of AI," Yu said.



Dr. Yu's research assistants helped create promotional materials.

Dr. Yu invited four different panelists to campus, three of whom work with AI and technology, including as researchers and entrepreneurs. The fourth panelist was a professor from the School of Hotel, Restaurant and Tourism Management at the University of South Carolina.

Luther students and the wider community interacted with the panelists in the following ways:

- Classroom visits: the panelists visited four different classrooms on Friday morning, engaging students in the business, marketing and management fields.
- Faculty and staff had opportunities to meet the speakers at a reception for division faculty and a lunch for all faculty and staff.
- An evening workshop open to everyone included presentations from each panelist and a moderated Q&A from the audience.
- The next morning, Dr. Yu planned a more casual event at The Landing Market, with each panelist at separate tables, available for relaxed conversations with students and community members.
- Three research students had the skills-building opportunity to help Yu create pre-event polling as well as promotional material.



Nathan Thompson, the CEO of Assessment Systems visiting a class to talk about AI

Dr. Yu said she wanted the project to provide students with access to the AI industry. She created this event to “help students explore potential career paths in AI, while also enhancing their capacity for critical thinking and ethical analysis.” By building stronger connections with corporate partners in the AI sector and creating internship pathways, Yu hoped to increase curiosity and motivation in students for continued engagement, while also providing a framework to evaluate and contribute to technological advancements responsibly.

American Model United Nations

Mentored by Political Science Professor Dr. Orçun Selçuk.

The CEPE supported the Luther College Model UN team’s participation in the American Model United Nations (AMUN) conference in Chicago last November. Nineteen students attended the conference where they represented the delegation of South Korea. Through active engagement in committee sessions, participants gained valuable experience in diplomacy and cross-cultural negotiation.

American Model UN provides invaluable professional experience for students. Dr. Selçuk said the process asks students to put themselves in the shoes of their assigned country and develop policy positions that rely on quantitative data to argue for or against speeches on the floor and draft resolutions, regardless of their own personal viewpoints

“LCMUN students come from a variety of disciplines and the topics they tackle are transdisciplinary as well, ranging from illicit trade in small arms, market governance, and nuclear security, drawing from disciplines such as political science, economics, and physics. The students collaborate with their peers to research topics, present arguments, and take action,” Selçuk said.

Through this experience, students often experience a growth in their own curiosity and motivation to learn about international affairs and advocacy. They also learn about topics they might not have known about or researched.

Selçuk added that, “Students who participate in this conference are more likely to study abroad, apply for global internships, and pursue graduate school opportunities in fields that have a direct connection to global governance.”

Luther Library Tabletop Games Night



Students building community by playing a board game in Preus Library

Once a semester, the library stays open on a Friday night for a “library after hours” tabletop game night. Emily Mineart, Interlibrary Loan and Student Success Librarian, said there was an average of 71 students participating in game nights this year. “This event caters to all students, regardless of major or what activities they might be involved in on campus. It brings people together in what is commonly referred to as a ‘Third Space’ a place where you don’t need to belong to any certain group and you don’t need to buy anything or pay to be there. You can just go and exist,” Mineart said.

The library has a collection of games for students to check out or students can bring their own games. During game night, at least one pen and paper role playing game (RPG) is available. Mineart often asks a faculty or staff member to lead the RPG. “Students love that interaction with faculty,” she said. Playing games allows students to engage with faculty in a way that isn’t tied to grades. This breaks down intimidation and creates community.



Students and faculty playing an RPG at the “Library After Hours” game night

Mineart sees it as success when first year students come, sometimes even alone, which takes a lot of courage. She makes sure they get included in a game and sometimes, they find their people.

The value of unplugged, face-to-face events is real, especially as students report a greater sense of isolation and loneliness. Mineart said these game nights can build connections between students as well as between students and faculty and staff. Having the event in the library also helps students to see the library as a welcoming place to gather. The CEPE provided pizza and much needed snacks for the evening of social interaction and games.

December

Dr Alfred Montero Visit

The CEPE helped fund Dr. Alfred Montero's visit to speak about polarization in Argentina. Dr. Montero is Department Chair of Political Science and International Relations at Carleton College. Dr. Orçun Selçuk invited Montero to address his International Studies class to this lecture as well as the wider campus.

Through the lens of Argentina's history, Dr. Montero shared stories of powerful partisan antagonism and he asked students to consider if and when political leaders might have ethical responsibilities in the face of adversarial politics. Students were challenged to wrestle with the question of when polarization becomes harmful and when it's a natural part of the political process.

The conversation helped students from the U.S. put the present political climate in perspective as they heard about intense partisanship in other countries. This visit was especially of interest to political science students but connected to the Spanish and History departments as well.

Semester-long project for Qualitative Research Methods in Anthropology

Planned by Dr Maryna Nading, Professor of Anthropology

For Dr. Nading's Qualitative Research Methods class in Anthropology, she wanted students to experience the methodology and techniques of ethnographic research. Nading knew an excellent way to do this was to connect her students to other working anthropologists.

During the semester, Nading brought in three anthropologists, two through Zoom and one in-person, to talk about projects and processes in their research. Nading's goal was to expose the students to varying ways of collecting data and to show them that anthropology can be involved in community participatory work.

For their semester-long project, students learned about aging through readings and a visit from Dr. Brittany Peterson. Then, through a partnership with the University of Iowa Public Health and Aase Haugen Senior Services (now called The Highlands), students interviewed and observed Highlands residents, gathering data during multiple visits to the nursing home.

Nading said the experience of participating in a research project through interviewing and being part of events at The Highlands, showed the students they were capable of doing research with an older population, and that it's important work.

Although interviews and observations are the most common ways of doing ethnographic research but the classroom speakers also helped students see the diversity of research methods. "It made it more real because they are doing this work," Nading said. The students were already motivated and saw their future in the world of social science. This interaction with other anthropologists connected students to scholars.

Spring 2026

Near the start of the semester, Ms. Jenny Kunka joined The CEPE team as Assistant Director. Jenny brings invaluable experiences to the role. Previously she was Director of the Northern Rockies Institute of Theology where she planned and hosted educational events such as workshops, retreats, and speakers in person and online. At the same time, Jenny contributed journalistically to public engagement by writing for the *Great Falls Tribune* daily newspaper in Great Falls, Montana. She also continues to work as a certified Wellness Coach and credentialed Life and Grief Coach, accompanying people who are navigating transitions and life's challenges. The CEPE is fortunate and thrilled to have Jenny bringing experience, insights, and enthusiasm to our work.

Dr. David J. Roslien Distinguished Lecture in Science and Leadership: Dr. Michael Osterholm, April 15

The CEPE proudly hosted an especially apt Roslien Distinguished Lecture this semester with Dr. Michael Osterholm in a fireside chat conversation format with Dr. Mark V. Larson. We write this report at the same time that folks previously onboard the cruise ship where the Hantavirus spread and claimed lives are returning to home countries. Simultaneously, daily news stories report on policies and public relations in the Department of Health and Human Services and the CDC. Public Health is being shifted in major directions to change the dynamics between science and government in key areas such as vaccines and pandemic preparedness. In that context, Dr. Osterholm's lecture entitled "Public Health in Crisis: What This Means to You" was of vital interest to students, staff, and faculty at Luther as well as the broader community.



Dr. Osterholm engaging students at the informal meetup

Before the public lecture event, Dr. Osterholm generously agreed to hold an informal meetup with Luther students who care about and engage in public health from a variety of angles, backgrounds, fields of study, and professional aspirations. Approximately 20 Luther students, including majors in Global Health, Math, Biology, Social Work, Political Science, and more, had the rare opportunity to discuss Public Health with Dr. Osterholm, who framed many of his responses as encouragement and inspiration for the students to put their current learning to work in improving the lives and livelihoods of people around the world.



Dr Osterholm and Dr. Larsen in conversation on the CFL stage for the public lecture

The public lecture took place in the CFL Main Hall and drew a large and diverse audience from within Luther and the surrounding communities. The conversation between the two doctors on stage captivated the audience with a mix of opportunities and consequences if we fail to seize them. In the audience Q&A session that closed the lecture, questions were posed by current students, faculty, and local medical professionals. The lecture concluded with a book sale and signing in the CFL lobby during which Dr. Osterholm connectedly deeply with folks who sincerely thanked him for his work and for taking time to contribute to the learning that Luther brings to the people who study and work at the college as well as those who live near enough to take advantage of such programs.

On a final note, the lecture was livestreamed and the video is available on the Luther Youtube channel. Live viewership online was among the highest of any event by The CEPE, and the video continues to accrue views.

Histories of Resistance in Times of Oppression, April 8

The CEPE also produced an event that featured 4 members of the History Department faculty who spoke to the current events of political resistance in the US, particularly in Minnesota in early 2026, by looking to other historical times and places of people resisting official oppression.

We formatted the event so that each faculty member would give a lightning talk on their areas of resistance history, which would lead into a discussion amongst themselves before opening to an audience Q&A. Prof. Mark Guerri presented on acts of resistance to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850; Prof. Anna Peterson presented on various forms of German resistance to the Nazis in the 1930s and 40s; Prof. Brian Caton presented on several specific resistance techniques used to address governmental powers; and Prof. Richard Mtisi presented on forms of resistance to Apartheid in South Africa.

The panel audience included Luther students, staff, and faculty as well as a range of community members. Among the feedback from attendees was a consistent appreciation of this critical thinking academic approach to the present moment by examining analogous historical moments with an eye towards elements that may continue to serve resistance activism as well as towards diagnosing what is uniquely appropriate to contemporary civic action and engagement.

In addition to The CEPE's own major events—Dr. Osterholm's Lecture and the Histories of Resistance Panel—the Center sponsored several programs produced by other campus colleagues and units.

These events include the following:

- Earth Day / Identity Studies Speakers
- Black History Month Speaker
- Dr. Frances Negrón-Muntaner of Columbia University, Phi Beta Kappa Lecture
- Luther Student Participation in College Hackathon
- Luther Student Teams for the Pi515 AI Competition—one Luther team (next page) took first place.



Pi515 AI Competition Team

Wrap-Up

During 2025-2026 year, The CEPE supported and collaborated with many other campus units including:

Anthropology, Biology, Business, Communication Studies, Computer Science, CIES, Data Science, English, Environmental Studies, Global Health, History, Management, Marketing, Mathematics, Nursing, Political Science, Preus Library, Religion, and Sociology

The CEPE looks forward to Fall 2026. We have several programs in the works, from an on-campus visit by Stephen Graham Jones in late October to a series of events, including a Candidate Forum, connected to this year's midterm election. We also plan to resume some of our platforms for sharing the work of students, staff, and faculty to engage ethics in meaningful ways that extend beyond the classroom—a new season of our Podeia podcast is among these plans, so catch up on our first 3 seasons this summer and tune in next Fall.

Our sincere gratitude and admiration for all of the Luther folks who engaged with The CEPE this academic year.