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### Gardner-Webb Faculty and Staff Host Presidential Debate Watching Event

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CAMPUS NEWS

# Gardner-Webb Faculty and Staff Host Presidential Debate Watching Event

BY OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS ON SEPTEMBER 30, 2020



## President Dr. Downs Serves as Moderator for Analysis and Discussion of First Debate

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.—A group of Gardner-Webb University faculty and staff hosted a viewing party Tuesday night for the first presidential debate between President Donald J. Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden. The event was moderated by GWU President Dr. William M. Downs, whose research and teaching expertise includes electoral behavior, political parties, and populist movements.

"I am now in my 36th year as a political scientist, and I've always been intrigued by both the substance and the style of presidential debates," noted Downs. "In the high-stakes election year of 2020, it was important that we gather a cross-section of the Gardner-Webb community to digest and then make sense of what we saw and heard from the candidates. Given the times in which we live, I don't believe it's hyperbole to call this a pivotal election."



Gardner-Webb President Dr. William M. Downs listens to the panel of faculty and staff.

The panel of GWU experts included: Dr. Elizabeth Amato, assistant professor of political science; Dr. Bob Carey, chair of the Department of Communication Studies; Dr. Casey Delehanty, assistant professor of political science; Dr. June Hobbs, professor and director of undergraduate research; and Dr. Jeff Tubbs, GWU vice president for Planning and Institutional Effectiveness. They selected a group of 16 students to attend and offer their questions and perceptions from the evening.

Downs began the pre-debate dialogue by asking what advice the panelists would give Biden and Trump. Amato suggested that when the two men talk about COVID-19 they should demonstrate compassion towards the suffering the virus has caused. Hobbs noted that both men should speak about things they care about.

When the debate was over, Downs asked the panelists, "If you were watching this debate from another country, what would be your assessment of the health of American democracy?" Hobbs replied that the debate was a good example of the American stereotype—loud, screaming, talking over one another. Carey noted that the candidates' speech and actions had not represented democracy. Tubbs described the scene as chaos. "It patterned a lot of the talk shows—it's always an insult or isolated incident that only served to create more angst among the opponent," Tubbs stated.



The panelists gave a slight edge to Biden for the evening, noting that Trump was too combative. "Trump was doing well at hitting points that looked really good for him, but Trump couldn't get out of his own way and talk about the things he was winning at," Delehanty observed. "I don't think Biden hurt himself a lot."

Hobbs added, "I wish Mr. Trump would come to take my rhetoric course—red herring, slippery slopes, false dilemma—he let himself get rattled. Biden was prepared, he managed to stay cool."

The students were not impressed with the performance of either candidate. Luke Beamer summed it up this way, "I feel like I was watching me and my brother grow up on TV, instead of building our towers higher, they are pulling the floorboards out from one another. When I look on the screen, I can't see myself as a person. There is not a party to put yourself to—it's a person. The mediator put the questions out there; I don't think we got the answers we wanted."



Talen Frances commented, "Nobody won. I was disappointed in the lack of information, and I could not focus because they made so many statements that were not informed enough."

Downs' final question related to expectations for the October 7 vice presidential debate. The panelists agreed that, unlike other years, the stakes are high for the VP candidates. Amato advised, "Vice presidential debates usually don't matter that much, but we will hear a much clearer presentation of the candidates' positions. It may be a better example of a democratic debate."

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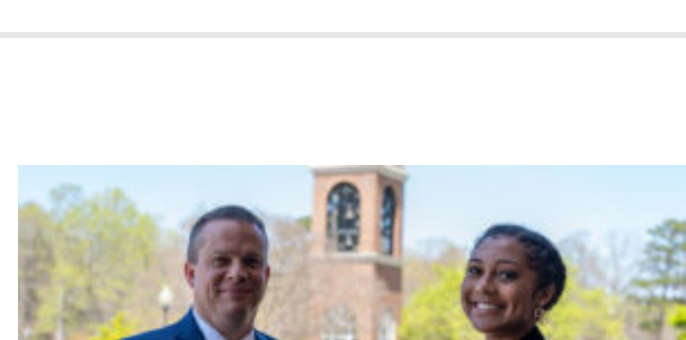


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